The background of the cover is a photograph of a desk. In the foreground, a fountain pen with a dark red barrel and a silver-colored nib lies diagonally across a piece of aged, yellowed parchment. To the left of the pen is a small, dark glass ink bottle with a gold-colored label. The desk surface is dark and textured. In the background, another ink bottle and some papers are visible but out of focus. The lighting is warm and focused on the pen and parchment.

BURDEN OF AN ANCIENT OATH

A THRILLING CRIME MYSTERY FULL OF TWISTS

JOSHUA BROWN

BURDEN OF AN ANCIENT OATH

**New York Murder Mysteries
(Book 1)**

**By
Joshua Brown**

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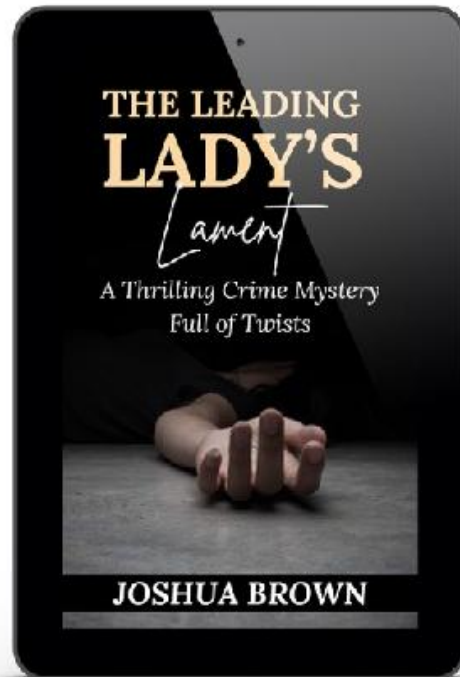


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Chapter 1

Jack

She entered my office in a whirlwind. Her eyes shone a bright green beneath the pale light of the room. Red strands of a colorful dress hung beneath the muddy brown coat wrapped around her shoulders. She walked with pomp and circumstance, like some royal princess late for an extravagant ball. Her long, brown locks were tightened on her head in a messy bun.

She was scared. I could tell just by looking at her. The way she held her bag in one hand and crumpled papers in the other. Her upturned nose and rosy cheeks accompanying a furrowed brow.

She caught my eye from across the room through a crack in my office door.

“Is this the Mercer Detective Agency?” her delicate voice asked anyone that would listen.

“Yes, ma’am,” Lauren Becket replied, getting up from her chair. She turned to me through the glass pane, the blinds half-drawn, then wiped a few misplaced strands of hair out of her face, attention back on the woman. “How can I be of assistance?”

Lauren had a keen sense for people, the same way I did. She’d see the nerves, the jitters, and would tend to the woman as if top priority. And on a lazy Tuesday afternoon, with no case taking up the Mercer Detective Agency’s time, this woman was the top priority.

“I hate to be a bother, but I’ve heard excellent things about Mr. Mercer,” she replied. I could hear her muffled

words through the ajar door. “I believe I’ve found myself in a bit of trouble, but I don’t really understand how. I was wondering if Mr. Mercer would be willing to hear me out?”

“I think he’d much prefer you to call him *Jack*,” Lauren said. I knew the smile that accompanied her words, especially with potential clients. That charming, beaming grin, so warm and inviting—no one could resist. “But if you’ll give me a moment, I’ll see if Jack’s got the time to speak with you.”

I rose from my desk, walking to the door.

“I’ll take it from here, Lauren,” I said before she made it inside.

Lauren pushed the door open, pointing the way with both hands for the woman to enter. She did, giving a half curtsy to Lauren as she passed. I closed my door, drawing the blinds shut to provide the woman with peace of mind. Even though Lauren would listen in through the intercom, a potential client always needed to feel safe.

She took a seat without me offering one, crossing one leg over the other. Her eyes scanned my office, most notably the pictures I had scattered around on the desk or on shelves. She didn’t speak, waiting for me to return to my seat.

“If you don’t mind?” I pulled a small, metal recorder from my pocket, clicking it on and setting it down on the desk.

“Not in the slightest,” she replied, rifling through her handbag. “And I hope you don’t mind?”

The woman drew a box of thin cigarettes. Having no doubt seen the ashtray with six half-smoked cigarettes on my desk, she might have seen it as an invite.

“Of course not,” I said, leaning back. Accompanying the recorder, I drew a notebook from inside the desk with a ballpoint pen.

My reliance on notes and thoughts on a case came in many forms. More often than not, the recorder was enough. Still, from time to time, handwritten documentation was the only way to go. Having multiple mediums to go through gave my mind enough stimulation to get the job done.

She lit her cigarette, offering me one. I declined the thin stick, grabbing my own box of Lucky Strikes and putting one in my mouth. She leaned over the desk, lighting it.

"What is it that brings you here, Miss..." I invited her to give me her name.

She declined, handing me sheets of paper that grew crumpled in her hands. "These letters."

I scanned them for a name. Marilyn Crossley.

"And what about them do you find so suspicious, Miss Crossley?"

"That's the thing, Mr. Mercer, I don't rightly know..."

"Please, call me Jack. But do go on," I scribbled her strange response down on my yellow paper.

"You see, I recently moved into my home with my husband and children. There's nothing special about it, nor do I find it to be situated in a place where any strange events should occur, and yet, they have."

"Strange events?"

My initial thoughts led me to think supernatural, not that I believed in any of the hocus pocus. Far too many people still believed in ghouls and goblins, so I wouldn't put it past her to do the same.

The more she spoke, the more I felt intrigued to listen. There was something strange about her. The way she held herself, the lack of nerves regardless of whatever she was here for. Being in New York City, it was easy enough to think this was a strange encounter with the daughter of some rich

tycoon who managed to get involved in some shady business.

Raised prim and proper, showing no emotion, and tucking whatever fears she held deep inside.

"I use it in the loosest sense, of course. I'm not much one to believe in witchcraft or spooks. But I can see that's what you're thinking, right?" she asked, a soft smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"You're not wrong," I said.

"Reality is often stranger than fiction," she said. "That's what they say, right? I think I've found myself in the prime example of it."

"Right. Go on?"

She shook her head. "I believe it's best for you to read the letters to get an understanding of what I mean. Saying it out loud will sound almost silly without context."

I did as she instructed.

Every letter was handwritten in astonishing calligraphy—not just simple cursive, with every stroke ending in a flourish. The writing's beauty didn't carry over in the words' contents, nor did it match the poor spelling.

She sat in silence while I read, only a faint whistle from her breathing and puffing on the thin cigarette, letting me know she was still around.

The handwritten letters gave very little in the way of help and understanding. They spoke of a different time, centuries before when the land was overrun by ghastly creatures and demonic entities. In the same line, it would cut to the modern-day and how vile the world had become.

Where the penmanship was stylistic and splendid, the literacy was lacking tremendously. The writer continued in

rambles and rants about old gods, Cthulu, Odin, Ra, and more, and how eternal fire would soon consume this world.

All of which somehow led back to Marilyn Crossley.

Apart from sparse details of her involvement, with more accusatory claims and bold expressions about her existence, there was little in the way of how she'd bring the end times.

"Looks like you've found yourself a secret admirer," I leaned back in my chair. Her patience was remarkable, forcing the nib of her cigarette down in the ashtray.

"Indeed."

"This isn't anything new, Miss Crossley. Perhaps it's just some kids having fun, trying to scare the new residents. It wouldn't be the first time that someone's sent threatening letters out in New York with nothing coming of it but movie deals and press releases," I tried stilling her fears.

"Yes, *The Watcher*, correct? That was my first thought too. A little bit of ribbing because we were new in town. I also considered that maybe these letters weren't for me, that they were intended for the previous owners—who left in a hurry, I might add. But you see, Mr. Mercer... Jack, I don't believe that's the case. I have more," she stuck her hand into her purse, pulling out a stack of ten more letters and setting them down on the table. "The letters you read are the most out-there of the lot—the most recent, too. You see, they started off far more straightforward. Almost jovial in nature with a cheery tone. Nothing involving long-dead religions and lost gods, and far less blasphemy and cursing."

She paused for a moment, lighting another cigarette.

I spent some time inspecting her hands. The light yellow shade that splotched on her index and middle finger led me to believe this chainsmoking was a new venture—no doubt from the nerves that came with the letters.

“But all of that changed one day,” smoke escaped her mouth with every word. “The jovial nature turned to this sullen, grim heresy. He spoke of cats and dogs and vile things that my children would want to do with them. My husband, God bless his soul, has rarely been home lately with work. He barely listens to my pleas of anguish, brushing these letters off as if they’re nothing. That’s why I don’t think them just schoolyard pranks, Jack.”

“Do you have any idea what this person could want with you or your family? The house, maybe? Trying to scare you out of it?” I asked, eyeing the box of Lucky Strikes on my desk. I’d have another myself if I wasn’t trying to quit.

“Maybe? The house was on sale for a damn good price when we took it. That’s why I thought these letters might have been addressed to the previous owners who had the common sense to run away before any of the threats got serious.”

“And you’ve spoken to them? The previous owners that is.”

“I have,” she sighed. “They left because the husband found work out of town. They don’t care much about the money. They wanted to get rid of the land without a hassle rather than deal with banks and real estate agencies.”

“And this only started when you moved into your new house then?”

“Yes, that’s why I thought it might have been related to the previous owners.”

An obvious question with an obvious answer, but there was no smugness in her response. She didn’t try and belittle or berate me for my foolish inquisition. A simple test of a person’s character, and thus far, she proved to be stronger than most.

"Do you have any idea what the end goal to all of this might be?" I shuffled with the box of Lucky Strikes.

"No, but I can't imagine it being anything pleasant. You've seen the worst of them. You can almost picture the blood-curdling screams from the madman who penned these letters."

"Blood-curdling? More like a toddler throwing his toys out of the crib, I'd say. Whoever's doing this can't be sound of mind, and they obviously think your family is essential for something. I guess I'm going to have to be the man who figures out what."

"So, you'll take my case?" she asked, near jumping out of her seat. The first signs of emotion she showed since entering the office.

"Yes, I'll take your case. Whoever's harassing you and your family will be brought to justice, miss Crossley, of that I can assure you."

We got up, and I led her through the door. Saying our goodbyes, she departed my office.

"What do you think about this one?" I asked, turning to Lauren.

Flicking the intercom system to my office off, she leaned back in her chair. Her lime green dress stretched around the bosom and contorted down, reaching her hips. She looked as stumped as I felt, crossing her arms.

"I... I don't know," Lauren replied.

"At least I'm not alone then," I scoffed, making my way back to my office, collecting the envelopes and letters. It was going to be another long night delving deep into the startings of a case.

"Feel free to head home if you want. I won't be in much longer," I called through the door.

Lauren stuck her head through. "You sure? I don't mind sticking around if you need someone to bounce ideas off."

"Nah, I'm gonna look at it in the comfort of my chair next to the fire tonight. Just let Aaron know we've got business to take care of in the morning. He might come in handy with those computer skills of his."

"Got it, boss," Lauren said.

She left 20 minutes later, and I was soon to follow.

Chapter 2

Jack

Spending a painful night alone with the stack of letters, a pack of Lucky Strikes, and half a bottle of whiskey, I started my investigation into the case. As Marylin said, the earliest of the letters were almost pleasant to read. The calligraphy and style were natural, almost like a love letter with sing-song timing and rhythm.

The letters spoke of better times, not all that long ago, when the word was at peace. But even these pleasantries carried a dark undertone. When reading between the lines, it was easy to see that the world was a better place without Marylin Crossley in it. Perhaps the subtle nuances escaped Marylin. Maybe she wasn't looking for them, but the sinister nature left a bleak outlook for her future.

Beyond the gibberish and rambling that sprouted throughout the letters, I found a few lines that caught my attention and kept me hooked:

On Parris, the mutt ate the cake, and the wicked sang their knowing song. With soot and piss, we'll find your wrong.

Another read:

Prick, prick, pricking, tick, tick, ticking, your blood will flow. Filling valleys, and rivers, and oceans—sink or swim, let's begin.

Out of 13 letters, these seemingly obscure messages felt more out of place than the rest. Why? I had no idea. Somewhere in the back of my mind, something clicked. A

strange sensation of knowing, but it was lost in a sea of thoughts.

As I often did with strange notes and letters of this kind, I tried deciphering any code. Reading the first letter of both the right and left, trying to see if a message ran along the spine. I tried piecing together hidden messages in strange places, the first word of every page or paragraph. But there was no logical reasoning to how these letters were written. They were long slews of nonsensical babbling from start to finish, growing ever-more delirious with each new page.

There were only words, lines, and sentences, with some making more sense than others. Somehow, all of them eluding to Marilyn Crossley and her oncoming death. The thought that this might be a madman trying to warn her of some ill-timed fate seemed plausible. The preachings of a lost prophet trying to protect rather than harm.

But even that fell short with direct threats of murder and mutilation. Marilyn's children had similar mentions. They were the spawn of the wicked and would someday, too, find their untimely fates at the hands of whoever sent these letters out. But never once did Marilyn's husband come up in any of the documents—not even in fleeting.

Whoever was after her had no interest in anyone but her and those who came from her. Was that a clue? Or was this just some sick bastard looking to scare a poor mother?

After reading them one last time, polishing off a quarter of the whiskey and another two smokes, I decided to head to bed. In the morning, I'd be able to approach the case with fresh eyes. Lauren and Aaron could help too.

~

"Morning, boss," Aaron said the second I stepped into the office. It was a little after 6 AM. I thought I'd get in early, before my team, and organize my thoughts. Seeing him

there was a reminder of his loyalty to his position as my second detective.

"Aaron, you didn't have to come in so early," I replied, looking around the office. On his desk, Chinese takeout boxes stood, half-eaten with chopsticks sticking out the top.

"Come in? I never left," Aaron chuckled. "Lauren sent me a message saying everyone was headed home, so I thought I'd come and make use of the computers and see what I could get on this case."

"I already thought you were home," I replied, removing my coat and hat, flinging it over the rack beside the door.

"Had a personal errand to attend. Everyone was gone when I got back," Aaron ran a hand through his slick, black hair. "But let's talk about the case."

"You found something?"

"No," Aaron shook his head. "But that's the interesting thing, right? You'd think that a name like Marilyn Crossley, so bold and out there, would turn something up. But it didn't."

"What do you mean?" I gestured for Aaron to follow, walking through the empty space to my office. Pushing open the door, drawing open the blinds, Aaron found a seat opposite me at the desk.

"I tried tracing the name back as far as I could. I found a birth certificate for a Marilyn Crossley, here in New York, dated around the time the victim might have been born. But that's about all I could find. There's no record of a Marilyn Crossley living in New York, and anyone who shares the name is so far from the city, too old, or long dead."

"That doesn't inspire much hope," clearing my throat, I dropped into my leather chair.

“No, it really doesn’t. But we’re still early on in this investigation—”

“Sure, but there should have been something. A person doesn’t just disappear out of thin air,” I cut him off. “But maybe we’re not looking in the right places. I’ll have to have a chat with her and see.”

“What are you thinking?” Aaron shrugged his shoulders. His wrinkled shirt billowed haphazardly with his humph.

“I don’t know. You’ve done everything in one night that I planned on doing through the day. I’m stumped,” a sigh left my lips. “How about you head home, get some rest, and I’ll take it from here? I’ll go pay Marilyn a visit and see if I can find something.”

“I caught a couple hours of sleep here at the office,” Aaron said. “I’ll head home for a shower and be back before you know it.”

Giving him a nod, Aaron rose from his seat and left.

I spent the rest of the morning going through my notes and listening to the recorded conversation between myself and Marilyn. There was nothing, not really. Lauren came in somewhere between eight and nine, bringing me a cup of coffee and a fresh box of Lucky Strikes. We spoke little, with her just as stumped as Aaron and me.

Not wanting to waste much time on this case, I waited until 9:30 to arrange a meeting with Marilyn Crossley. This strange name game was becoming problematic, and if we didn’t get to the bottom of it first, we’d never manage to get to the bottom of the case.

Chapter 3

Jack

She lived outside the city, nestled between a dense overgrowth of trees and other white picket fence homes. There were no high walls out here—no safety measures barring neighborly protection and kindnesses. Her home was a Victorian-inspired double-story house, decorated in pastel blues and a darker shade for awnings.

It was beautiful.

Had I been much one to take a stand-alone, this might have been preferred over my simple, single-bedroom apartment. She waited for me on the front steps, beside a simple hedge path for the cars to drive along. In her hands were two cups of coffee.

“Morning,” she said, descending the short staircase.

“Apologies for bothering you this early,” I said, getting out of my car.

“No need for apologies. I’d much rather you come knocking early in the morning than be found dead,” she snickered. But there was fear behind her words.

“Of course,” I accepted the cup of coffee she held out. Dressed in a long, woolen bathrobe, Marilyn Crossley stood. Her hair wet and wrapped in a towel, she showed no signs of care for her appearance. I liked that about her.

“My husband’s inside doing his morning routine; I hope you don’t mind that we have our chat outside?”

I sipped the coffee.

“Not at all. Living in the city doesn’t give me much time to see the greenery of the world.” I looked around. The Crossley family garden was spectacular. Roses grew along the beds with an enormous Weeping Willow on either side of their home.

“So, Detective Mercer...” she paused, “Jack, what is it that brings you here? Have you uncovered anything on the case?”

“It depends on how you look at it,” I said, leaning against the door of my black Dodge Charger. “A member of my team spent the night looking into your name. It seems, apart from your date of birth, there’s little to nothing he could dig up. A man’s gotta wonder, Miss Crossley, how have you stayed hidden beneath the shroud of social media for this long?”

I looked her up and down. She gave no signs of discomfort or fear, simply a nod of her head.

“That’s because my name isn’t Marilyn Crossley,” she sighed. “I was *born* Jane Dench. At least, that’s what I believed up until recently. I use the term born loosely here, of course.”

“What do you mean?” I cocked a brow, watching Jane shuffle for the box of thin cigarettes inside her gown pocket.

“Well, after the letters began pouring in, I spoke with my parents. They’ve always been good people but wanted to spare the details of how I entered this world. I was adopted from a foster home a little while after my parents shunned me. They hid the secret because I was as much a daughter to them as their actual children.”

“Why didn’t you bring this up earlier?” To think that she knew these details but didn’t mention them was an annoyance at the very least.

“Because whoever’s sending these letters knows more about me than even I do. Or at least that part of my life from

decades ago. I thought there was a chance you'd manage to find something on that name, something that I can use to know who my parents were, but more-so, find the reason I'm being targeted," she replied, lighting her cigarette.

I joined her.

"We could've done that anyway," I returned.

"Yes, you could have. I know you could have. But I had a vision for how this would turn out, and I suppose it doesn't always work out the way one would want," she puffed on the cigarette, not inhaling the smoke. "But it took you a night to figure it out, so there's no harm, no foul, right?"

"Right," I swallowed the rest of the coffee in two giant gulps. "But this does give us more to go on."

"How so?"

"It means that we know they're not after Jane Dench; they're after a woman that's long been dead to the world. The only question is, why?" I eyed the cigarette in my hand. The smoke trailed off in long strands before dissipating into the air around us.

"Are there any other secrets you've been holding onto in hopes we could recover mysteries from your past?" the words left my lips without thinking. An accusation like that could've upset the weaker willed. But Jane shrugged it off without much thought.

"No, I don't believe I do. I know nothing about that time in my life. I wasn't even a year old when the Dench family took me in. So, I've lived my life as one of them, in the outskirts of New York, blissfully ignorant to what I could have been," she responded.

"And your parents, they don't know—"

"No, they don't know anything about what happened there. And if they did, they've not given me anything more,

either,” Jane cut me off before I could finish my question.

“Miss Dench, thank you for your time and hospitality,” I handed the empty cup back to her. “And don’t worry. We’ll get to the bottom of this, one way or another. If anything else comes up, you’ve got my details.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Jane said, giving a brief smile. Behind it, I could see the pain in her eyes that we’d made no movement forward on the case.

But that was the nature of the game, I supposed. Sometimes things didn’t work out as they were meant to, and toiling on for a better tomorrow was the only option.

Chapter 4

Jack

"How was your meeting with miss Crossley?" Lauren asked the second I stepped through the door. She was on her feet, a sweet smile on her face, ready for any news.

Aaron Hart sat at his desk, spinning on his chair to drop into the conversation.

"It went... well," I replied, pausing briefly while contemplating my words. "Turns out, miss Crossley is actually a woman named Jane Dench."

"What?" Aaron cocked a brow.

"She was adopted by a well-to-do family somewhere in her youth. That's why the name Marianne Crossley doesn't come up anywhere. No one knows about her birth parents and no one knows why she could be targeted by whoever's after her. So, it was a dead-end, apart from what we learned, I guess," I shrugged my shoulders, dropping my coat off them.

Throwing it onto the coat rack, accompanied by my black fedora, I started for the kitchenette behind Lauren's desk.

"And why didn't she tell us this before?" Lauren asked, tucking a few stray strands of her red hair behind one ear.

"I can't help but think she was hoping we'd be able to find something about her parents. If we could find anything on the Crossley name, there'd be something to look for, right? She didn't want to muddy the water."

"But she wasted time," Aaron replied. "A whole night wasted because we weren't looking in the right places."

“Weren’t we? Whoever’s going after Jane knows that her parents were named Crossley, right? What stones could we have uncovered by having a name tethered...” I stopped, realizing the answer. “You could have looked up who adopted her and from where.”

“Exactly,” Aaron spun around in his chair, immediately typing away at his keyboard. “Now, it’ll take time, but if I followed this avenue last night instead of today, I could have found something by now.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the hand we were dealt. Jane Dench is afraid and knows just as much as we do about her family. We can’t really hold anything against her for not telling us,” I said, looking over to Lauren.

She shrugged her shoulders as if to say *I don’t know*, before dropping back into her chair.

“The real question is, why is someone threatening her to begin with?” I continued, pouring myself a glass of orange juice. “Marilyn Crossley barely existed in this world before she was adopted, so it can’t be anything directed at her. So, it’s gotta have something to do with her parents. But how bad could they have screwed up to put their daughter in a life or death situation?”

“You never know, maybe they didn’t screw up before, but they’re still screwing up and pissing people off,” Aaron replied.

He had a point. Pulling my box of cigarettes from my pants pocket, slotting one between my lips, I made my way over to the visitor’s seating area, close enough for both Lauren and Aaron to continue chatting about it all. After a lengthy sip of orange juice, nearly cleaning the thin glass out and lighting my smoke, I continued on.

“If we follow that path, it leads nowhere, though.”

“How do you figure?” Aaron asked, turning back to face me.

“Let’s say it’s drugs... they got into something with some real bad people, a cartel even... what reason would they have to threaten Jane Dench with these letters? The family didn’t care enough to keep her, so why would they save her life now? It’s an easy out both ways,” I said, kicking my feet up on the coffee table.

Aaron didn’t speak, but the look of understanding in his eyes was enough.

“A man’s got to believe it’s much worse than we initially expected. This isn’t just some random encounter with a stranger looking for trouble or kids pulling a prank on new homeowners, either. Whoever’s chasing after Jane Dench knows more about her than we do, and that’s a problem.”

“I’ll get in touch with Jane and find out more about where she was adopted from. The sooner we get ahead of this thing, the better chance we have of saving Jane from whoever’s chasing her,” Aaron replied, spinning around again.

Chapter 5

Jack

While I waited for any news back from Aaron, I found myself in a slump. There was nothing to go by but a bunch of letters left by a madman, threatening Jane's life. Knowing that there wasn't much else to do but wait, I decided the best place to do it was outside Jane's house.

Knowing that the letters arrived sporadically, faster in the beginning and slower the more time ticked on, I had to hope I'd catch a glimpse of the man who threatened Jane. I spent the better part of two days there, scoping the place out and catching funny glances from passersby.

But it was on the third day that someone finally came out from one of the homes, somewhere around lunchtime. He held a baseball bat in one hand and his phone in the other. From the way he held it, I could see he was recording.

He walked around the car, taking my number plates down before making his way to the driver's door. I rolled down my window, knowing he was just a concerned citizen looking to help out around the neighborhood. It was a simple gesture like this that I both admired and found absolutely foolish. This guy, dressed in his jeans and Pink Floyd t-shirt, was putting himself in danger. Sure, he might've chased away a potential threat, but he could've gotten himself killed.

"Morning," he said.

"Afternoon," I replied.

He checked his watch. "Right, I suppose it is. What brings you out to these parts, sir?"

“Nothing much,” I said. Though I’d be happy to go with this, I wasn’t going to give in too easily.

“It’s just, I’ve seen this car parked here every day now. It’s a nice car, but having someone sit in it all the time, watching that house,” he pointed towards Jane’s gate. “Seems a little suspicious, don’t you think?”

“You’re not wrong,” I replied, remaining otherwise completely oblivious. This was my first interaction with anyone in days, except for Lauren and Aaron. What harm could having a little fun do?

“Well, look, sir, I’m not looking for any trouble—”

“The baseball bat says otherwise,” I cut him off. “And I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that you were just about to say *but*.”

“Yes, yes, I was.”

“Then I should ask you what seems to be the problem here? A man can’t enjoy the scenery?” I snickered.

“I guess I can’t rightly stop you from parking here, no. But a man’s gotta wonder what’s going on when someone in a fancy car parks himself out in the street watching a house. Isn’t that considered casing a place?” he lifted the camera up to catch my face.

He seemed nervous. His striking blue eyes holding fears and doubts that coming outside maybe wasn’t the best idea.

Good, I thought. If anything, this would teach him not to approach strangers in the middle of the street.

“You could probably call it casing a place, that was to say I’d want to rob the house. But if I was a criminal, I don’t think I’d make it so obvious by sitting in a flashy car that’s bound to draw attention. I’d be inclined to drive something older with a smaller engine, and definitely a popular vehicle that no one would look twice at. Again, if I was casing the place, I

also wouldn't park under the same tree every day. Especially not in front of the same house, where someone's bound to see me from their windows. I also wouldn't be here for six hours, either. I'd make short stops at certain times throughout the day, maybe the morning, to find the routine and when the house is empty. Then the afternoon to see if anyone's back, maybe the kids from school. Finally, I'd put a lot more time into it at night. Of course, most of these would be on foot, making it look like I live in the area not to draw any attention to myself. I'd probably leave my car parked down the street in that strip mall for the hour or so that I'm out. They'll think I'm shopping, and no one would look twice at a car parked in a strip mall, even if it comes six times a day," I replied, adjusting in my seat and reaching for the box of cigarettes.

What was once a dream of quitting was quickly becoming a bad habit of smoking triple the amount of half-cigarettes in a day.

The man set the end of the baseball bat against the ground, looking up and down the street. The hand holding the cellphone pointed in a few key locations as if trying to follow what I was saying.

"That does seem like a better plan than sitting out here in the open. But I gotta ask, what *are* you doing here then?" He locked the phone and put it away in his pocket.

"I'm a detective," drawing my badge, I showed it to him. "More a private investigator, really, but who's here to argue semantics? I'm watching out for potential threats on the inhabitants of that house over there. I don't suppose you'd know anything about them?"

"No, sir, I can't say I do," he ran a hand through his curly beach blonde hair. "Is there something I should be aware of? Something involving the street and all?"

There was a slight quiver in his voice—an almost panic, even.

“No. It’s an isolated event,” without knowing much about the case, it was all I could say. But I really didn’t think it would extend further out to anyone else.

“Okay, good. Well, if you need a cup of coffee or a bathroom break, you feel free to come knocking on my door, sir.”

“Thanks for the kindness,” I replied. He spent another moment dawdling outside my car before stepping away once more.

I spent the rest of the day outside the car, looking over every now and then, only to find the man standing in his window, watching me. Noticing me looking at him, he gave me a thumbs up. I chuckled, turning back and looking on down the street.

~

Hours passed with little happening. I listened to my recorder, trying to scour information while looking down the road. I hydrated and ate a snack I bought at the corner store while looking down the road. I smoked half a box of cigarettes, near filling my ashtray while looking down the road.

The sheer mundanity of it was getting to me. The first day was the easiest, with a glimmer of hope that something might come from this. But the more time spent out here, the more I realized that I was chasing a pipe dream. The thought crossed my mind that whoever was doing this recognized my car and waited for me to leave before delivering another letter.

If that was the case, I was glad to be there—a threatening force, ever-watching.

But as I closed in on late afternoon, when I was just about ready to call it a day, a blue Chevy Impala pulled up to Jane Dench's driveway. It stopped at the side of the road and a man dressed in a cheap mailman's outfit got out. The car caught my attention because of its lack of number plates, and when the man emerged, I knew it was my man.

He was short, fat, and had a patchy beard that barely covered any of his face at all. He wore a pair of John Lennon glasses and held nothing but a single letter. He walked over to the mailbox, sliding it in, and without delivering another scrap of mail to anyone else down the street, returned to his car.

I considered getting out and speaking with him, but he was out and in his car within seconds. If he caught wind of me, that would've been even shorter. The best approach was to chase behind and catch him off guard. He couldn't have known there was an open case against him, so I still had the element of surprise.

The car made a U-turn in the street and drove back in the direction it came. I followed close behind at first, from the suburban areas of the outer city, back into New York. Had he managed to spot me? I don't know, but his driving became more erratic in the city. He took sporadic turns and flew over every amber light possible. He dodged in and out of the late afternoon traffic as if it wasn't there at all.

I followed at first, keeping a good distance, but as we hit the main roads, it became unsafe to keep chasing.

And when I finally lost him somewhere between one street and the next, I couldn't believe it. I was so close to the man who threatened Jane Dench, and then I lost him. And without number plates on his car and nothing else to go by apart from the Impala, it was pointless.

I'd never been so close but so far to something in my life.
And I had no one to blame but myself.

Chapter 6

Gwen

“Look, Jack, we all make mistakes. You can’t beat yourself up about this one,” I heard Lauren Becket’s familiar voice say. Soft and sweet, as always.

Having entered through the Mercer Detective Agency’s front door, I was *unsurprisingly* met by no one. Not Lauren at her station, nor Aaron at his. Just an empty office filled with a cloud of smoke. I snickered at the thought of Jack Mercer quitting smoking.

Everyone knew he had it in him, the stubborn old mule, but he enjoyed those Lucky Strikes far too much to give them up.

“I was so close to him. How did I let this happen?” Jack replied.

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t live in the past and let this eat away at you. There were no plates—you said it yourself. Everyone and their grandmother drives a Chevy Impala. To follow that thing through a city would be near-impossible,” Lauren replied, trying to calm him down.

I walked through the office quietly, making my way towards the door. Jack was sitting in his chair, facing the cabinet behind him with Lauren’s back turned to me. I leaned against the doorframe and listened in—more out of curiosity than anything else, waiting to see how long it would take them to notice me.

“All I had to do was follow,” Jack threw a wild fist into the armrest of his chair.

“But you said he was driving crazy, right? Maybe he did spot you and wanted to get away. It’s easier for him to have no regard for anyone else’s life when he’s facing life in prison,” Lauren replied.

“Is little Jacky feeling sorry for himself again?” I asked with a little giggle.

Both he and Lauren spun around to look at me.

“Gwen?” Jack asked, looking at me with squinted eyes as though I was an apparition.

“In the flesh, babe,” I said, stepping deeper into his office.

Looking at Jack, there was little change from when I last saw him. Tall, dark, handsome. His light brown hair always forced back neatly as if cut straight from the 1950s. The strong jawline, scars, and scrapes across his face, broad shoulders and dashing smile never changing.

He was like a fine wine, getting better looking with every year that passed.

“Nice to see you again, Gwen,” Lauren said, giving me a smile.

“What’s nice to see is this old grump hasn’t had any effect on your radiant smile, Lauren,” I replied.

Jack scoffed, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. Whatever put him in a lousy mood seemingly disappeared at the sight of me.

“Oh, he’s not so bad,” Lauren chuckled. “You’ve just got to work around the rough edges and get to the softer side.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve seen all the hard and soft parts Jack has to offer.”

Lauren laughed, knowing the history Jack and I shared. Being one of the very few privy to Jack’s personal life, there

were no surprises that she knew we had a thing for each other once. But it all erupted when we realized that work had to come before personal matters. In our line of work, a life often hung in the balance.

"Well, I'm guessing you're not here for a personal chat. I'll leave you two alone," Lauren said, walking by me. I waited for her to step out and close the door before I continued.

Taking a seat opposite Jack, I couldn't help but smirk at how he was looking at me. Dumbfounded and grinning like a fool.

"What's got you so riled up?" I asked, kicking my feet up on the desk.

"Just this case I've been working," Jack shrugged, giving a little more information. We were the same in that way, rarely keen to share or let the other know of our faults. I supposed that was another reason why our relationship was doomed to fail before it even began.

And that's why it hit me so hard to be there that day.

"Let's not focus on any of that, though," Jack pulled himself up, walking over to a cabinet. From it, he pulled two glasses and a bottle of whiskey. "What brings you here?"

"Well, the same problem really. Just a case I've been working on," a sigh escaped my lips. "You know I'm not the kind to ask for help, Jack, but I'm completely stumped on this one."

"Is that right? I never thought I'd see the day Gwen Sullivan knocked on my door for help," he gave me a smile, pouring the drinks. He reached over the table with mine, leaving the cap off the bottle, knowing we'd be here a while.

"It's been days without any leads at all. It's so cold at this point, I could swear it was made up."

"I know the struggle," Jack replied, bringing the glass to his lips.

I did the same.

"Look, I can't promise I'm going to be able to help at all, but tell me what's going on and we can see if something comes of it. We're both pretty good at this detective thing; I can't imagine neither of us can figure something out," Jack said, leaning back in his chair. It squeaked under his weight.

"That's the thing though, there's not really much to say about it," I replied, rooting through my shoulder bag and pulling out a stack of papers. "The family doesn't have any idea of why they're being targeted. They're just..."

"Receiving anonymous yet threatening letters?" Jack finished my sentence.

Though he eyed the stack of notes in my hand, there was no way he could've known what I was going to say. Unless he was facing a very similar threat.

"Either your deduction has gotten keener, or you're facing a very similar problem," I cocked a brow.

"You wouldn't believe it, but I guess destiny's got other plans for us parting ways," Jack shuffled inside one of his drawers before bringing a stack of his own papers out.

They were the same off-white paper, with a brown tinge to them. Folded with the same crease and a name scrawled atop one side.

"Now, ain't that something," I set my stack down on the table.

"I'm guessing the name is Marilyn Crossley?" Jack asked. "I wouldn't put it by her to hire a couple of detectives to sort this out, rather than just one. She seems wise enough to get a second opinion."

“Marilyn?” I sat on the name, long after Jack continued speaking. “No, the *man* who hired me is named Spencer Crossley. Or rather, Spencer Williamson, after his adoptive family.”

“Same thing happened here. Jane Dench is the target, but someone knows her name isn’t Jane, but Marilyn. I’m sorry to say, you’re shit out of luck asking me for help,” Jack downed his drink.

“It’s pretty clear what this means then, right? They’re siblings that got separated after their parents disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Jack asked.

“I use the term vaguely. Spencer didn’t have much to say about his folks, and it doesn’t look like anyone else can tell him anything, either.”

“People don’t just disappear, especially not when two kids get put up for adoption. There has to be a reason for giving a kid up,” Jack steepled his fingers, leaning back once more. I could see him getting lost in thought, just like he used to.

“Could’ve been doorstep drop-offs,” I added. It happened from time to time, where parents just left the kids on the doorsteps of orphanages. It wasn’t completely unbelievable, especially when considering how easily the parents vanished.

“Sure, but that doesn’t give any reason for how their names don’t come up anywhere. By the looks of things, the Crossley family vanished off the face of the earth.”

“I know, I had someone look into the lineage, and there’s just nothing. It’s like they were never there to begin with.”

Jack shook his head, not speaking while he thought. After a while of internal deliberation, he shrugged his shoulders and let out a grim sigh. He looked up to me, shook his head,

saying, "I do find it pretty peculiar that we somehow got the exact same case, only with two different people. What are the chances of something like that happening?"

The change of subject was *almost* welcomed.

"It's crazy, right?" I replied. "I haven't heard a word from you in half a decade, and now we're brought together in these very odd circumstances. Must be fate trying to tell us something."

I felt the smile tugging at the corner of my lips. I could see it happening to Jack, all the same.

"Well, it's not much help right now, but why don't we work on this one together?" Jack poured himself another glass of whiskey. "It'll be like old times, the two of us kicking ass and taking names."

"I should warn you, I've only gotten better since the last time we worked together." I gave him a wink. "I don't want you to feel inferior."

He laughed, raising his glass up to mine.

"Inferior? That would mean I had something over you at some point. And we all know you're the brains of these operations."

"Then how can I say no to your offer?" I asked, clinking glasses with Jack. "Let's kick ass and take names."

"Jack!?" I heard the sudden call come from behind.

The door swung open with Aaron Hart standing in it. He was out of breath, but the second he saw me, his eyes went wide.

"Gwen? Holy hell, good to see you again," he said, but before I had the chance to reply, he continued. "But I really need to talk to Jack about something. It's about a case we're working on."

“Gwen’s going to be helping out. We can chat about it together,” Jack replied.

“Right, good, because what I’ve found is something big. And it doesn’t look good...” Aaron’s grim tone set the tone for what was going to come next.

And where I was happy to hear there was some kind of headway on this seemingly impossible case, it pained me not to get a few more minutes alone with Jack Mercer.

Chapter 7

Jack

How surprising it was to be standing beside Gwen Sullivan, ready to tackle another case. Though we were both in the midst of what seemed to be an impossible case, I had to find joys in the little things. She wasn't the kind to ask for help, no matter the task—nor was I. So, to think that when she got so stumped, I was the person to call, brought a smile to my face.

That didn't stop the case from taking a turn for the worst with her introduction. Now, there were two—a brother and a sister locked in a battle for survival. The chances of either knowing the other existed was near-impossible, I thought. Had Spencer Crossley known anything about his sister, Gwen would've heard about it.

So, what then? The idea that they were twins sparked in my head. Both too young to remember, but Spencer could've been in his toddler years and still not recalled his youth and a sibling. She was a phantom part of his life, gone before she ever really existed. Now, years later, they were going to be brought together by this terrible tragedy.

The parents were my biggest concern. From everything I heard and all Aaron's searching, mother and father Crossley never existed to begin with. At least, until now, I suspected. He had to have had something to barge into the building, out of breath and excited to spill some news.

All these thoughts struck me at once while I followed him from my office back to his work station just outside. Lauren came too without an invitation, but she never really needed

one for anything anyway. She was always the pillar of the Mercer Detective Agency—both Aaron and I knew it.

Gwen walked in front of me, her hips swaying with every step. Five years was a long time, but she never managed to lose her figure. It was pristine, perfect almost, only enhanced by her beautiful green eyes, rosy cheeks, and auburn hair. Even from behind, and without having to see, I knew she had an almost gleeful grin on her face. She knew I'd be looking; that's why she put on a show with each step.

Our history, for whatever it was, made way for a strong relationship. We were lovers once, partners in crime (fighting against it, rather), and the best of friends the world could imagine. If I was a simpler man, I'd have asked her to marry me. And if Gwen was a simpler woman, she'd have said yes.

Now wasn't the time for those thoughts, I considered, shaking them aside and getting back to the matter at hand.

"So, what do you have for us, Aaron? The suspense is literally killing me," I said, watching him collapse into his chair.

"Figuratively," Gwen replied, trying to point out my mistake.

"No, I meant literally," I teased as she looked over her shoulder.

"I've been doing some digging into this little problem," Aaron cut in, trying to keep it purely business. "And what I found is an extremely sinister past for the Crossley family."

Gwen, Lauren, and I huddled around Aaron as he typed away at the computer, bringing up a single newspaper article from decades prior. Enhancing the image, zooming in to the exact article he was looking for, he gave us all some time to read it while he spoke.

“Turns out the Crossley family was slaughtered in their home all the way back in 1982. The funny thing is, with such a big story, you’d think there would be more about it, right? That the city would be up in arms about a family being killed and only two kids getting out of it alive? But that’s the thing... it completely vanished after this article. I couldn’t find anything else. It’s like this was swept under the rug completely.”

The article read of the Crossley family, Orlando and Jill, that were killed in their home on one late September night. There were no details about why it happened or who could’ve done it, but spoke of the abandoned children, Marilyn and Spencer. It did, however, mention that the family received threatening letters before the slaughter. A statement put out by then-police chief, Marty O’Brian, spoke of how the couple came to the station, but there was little to go on. The Crossley family received police protection for the better part of two months, with no further signs of anyone coming after them.

The murders happened just a few days after the police protection dispersed.

“What the hell?” the words left my lips without thinking. “So, you’re telling me that this all happened, and it was just brushed away like it never existed? But why?”

“That’s the thing, though, right? It was a murder in a small part of New York back when serial killers ran rampant across the United States. I want to believe that someone was trying to hide something. Still, I’ve also got the feeling that the Crossley family might’ve just been another forgotten killing. It didn’t even make the news beyond this small-time newspaper,” Aaron added.

“It doesn’t add up,” I cocked a brow, leaning over to make sure the date read 1982. “I saw a man at the Dench house

delivering a letter. There's no way he was able to pull this off back in the 80s and still be as young as he is."

"We can't put it past someone trying to be a copy-cat killer," Aaron shrugged.

"But he's also targeting Spencer's family. That's why Gwen's here."

Lauren, no doubt, already knew this by listening in to the conversation through her intercom. Aaron, however, spun around with a look of confusion on his face.

"And with that, you've got to think about how this guy figured out that Jane Dench and Spencer Williamson had anything to do with the Crossley family to begin with. We've got everything working in our favor, and you've only just managed to scrape a tiny shred of information on them—"

"Tiny shred? This is only the beginning," Aaron cut me off. "Jack, I see what you're getting at, but this thing goes deep. And it's really not looking good for those poor people if what you're saying is true."

"What do you mean?" Gwen asked.

"These murders have been happening for centuries. After getting the names of the parents, I managed to find out more about them. Orlando Crossley's line went nowhere... he was just an unlucky bystander in a twisted act. Jill, however, was the target of whoever entered their home that night."

Aaron paused, typing away at the keyboard until a family tree sprung up on his screen. It was made by him but seemingly checked out with dates of birth and death all across the graph.

"It seems whoever was unlucky enough to enter Jill's family line, they somewhere met their end at the hands of some twisted person. Unlike Jane, I was able to track the rest of the line pretty easily."

“Where does it lead back to?” I asked.

I knew that Aaron wanted to explain it all, go in-depth into how he figured it out, who he found, and what happened to them across the ages, but that could be done later. For now, it was best to stick to the facts and get to the point.

“All the way back to the Salem Witch Trials, if you can believe. Further still, to our forefathers back in England, in a small town called Bury Saint Edmunds. It looks like whoever’s going after this family is taking them out a family at a time, and it’s got something to do with witchcraft.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why leave anyone alive if you’re trying to eradicate a line?” Gwen cocked a brow, scratching her head.

“They were just kids, right? It looks like it’s the same for every line moving forward. The children always made it through the ordeal while the parents suffered an untimely fate. The kids were never older than a year or so, either,” Aaron pointed to the screen to demonstrate what he was saying.

“That just reaffirms my point then. Whoever’s doing this is definitely not nearing 400 years old. So, who the hell is it?”

The question was rhetorical, for the most part, but I could feel the agitation growing. These cases were always the worst. They had no reason to exist and brought only suffering to the poor souls that lived through them.

What reason would some fat slob dressed in a party store mailman outfit have to hurt this family in the modern age? Witches were disproven years before, and with it, so too should the hunts have stopped. Yet, those ignorant fools continued fighting some nonsensical fight because of the lineage and family line?

It made my blood boil.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Aaron said. “We always do, Jack, and we’re not going to stop now.”

“But this is just torture for torture’s sake,” I said. “Whoever’s doing this could’ve ended it three centuries ago by getting rid of the entire family, right? It’s like they’re leaving a lineage to make future generations suffer.”

“Sometimes there’s no reasoning behind the actions of bad people,” Gwen cut in, taking my hand in hers. She could no doubt sense my mounting anger and building tension. “That’s why there are people like us in the world, looking to make it a better place.”

“You’re not wrong there,” I squeezed her hand before letting it go. “But what if we missed our only opportunity by letting that driver slip away?”

“We’ll keep fighting,” Aaron replied before Gwen could say anything. “Because that’s what we do. And we don’t let anything get in our way.”

Chapter 8

Jack

"Can you believe it? All the way back to some bullshit that happened nearly 400 years ago," I said, walking into my office. Gwen followed behind, no doubt just as confused as me.

"Stranger things have happened, Jack. We all know that," Gwen replied, collapsing into a visitor's chair. "Cults are common enough. And there's no denying the lengths of depravity they'd go to, to fulfill some dark needs."

"It doesn't matter," I shook my head. "They're ruining two family's lives for no other reason than their own delusions. And you want to know what's worse? We've got nothing to go by, and if they end up succeeding, there are kids next in line for a future generation of suffering."

"We live in a strange world. But this begs so many questions," Gwen put her feet onto my desk, one foot over the other. Her dark leather boots pristine as always. "Why didn't they just kill the kids? Get rid of the whole thing at one time."

"Some twisted code of honor, probably," I replied, grabbing the bottle of whiskey and pouring two glasses.

"That's what you'd have to think, but it doesn't seem right. They're willing to slaughter these families in cold blood, right? Can't imagine kids are off the table in that case," Gwen replied, accepting the glass but not drinking.

It was bizarre. Rooting out the problem would be simpler than letting it live on. But they always happened early.

"The kids never made it past a certain age. Maybe whoever's behind this was banking on the adoptive parents not sharing the devastating tragedies of what happened," I shrugged.

"Or maybe it's to keep this thing alive," Gwen replied. "Without the family, there's no one to go after, and their twisted order dies. If this thing really is hundreds of years old, there are traditions and other nonsense keeping the dream alive."

"If that's the case, they could've figured something else to chase, but maybe you're right. People are inherently cruel, there's no disputing that," I sipped my drink.

Before Gwen managed to get another word out, in unison, our phones began to ring. My call came from Jane Dench and Gwen's was from Spencer Williamson. Gwen rose, stepping out of my office to take the call and I answered it inside.

"Detective Jack Mercer speaking."

"Jack? It's Jane," she sounded composed, but I could hear the quiver in her voice. "I need you to get down here right away."

"What's wrong, Jane?" I jumped to my feet.

"I just got another letter, but it's not for me," she said. "It's for you and a woman named Gwen Sullivan."

"I'm on my way."

Sharing this with Gwen, she received the same message from Spencer. Saying our goodbyes, we parted ways to collect notes on whatever this new problem was.

~

The sound of children laughing jovially one minute and crying the next came from the living room beside Jane Dench's kitchen. She stood with a lit cigarette in one hand,

tucked beneath the counter so the children couldn't see it. I didn't smoke out of respect to them.

With my trustee recorder on and set down on the table, I waited for her to speak.

"I hope you don't mind the children making noise. I've decided not to let them go out while dealing with this... issue of ours," Jane said, bringing the cigarette to her mouth, turning away.

"It's no problem at all. Best to be safe, rather than have anything bad happen to them," I replied. I wasn't going to share the news of children typically surviving these ordeals. But from their ages, somewhere between eight and ten, whoever was chasing Jane missed the deadline.

"I'm sorry to call you under such ominous circumstances," Jane didn't wait much longer, pulling the letter from her gown. "But it said that I must call at exactly 4 PM and get you to come over. Once you're here, I must deliver this hand-sealed letter. Had it not been done precisely to the instruction, they'd know."

I took the letter from Jane, opening it up.

It was a simple sheet of paper with only a single line written:

Cease your investigation, Jack Mercer, or those around you will suffer.

Short, sweet, and to the point.

I was strangely disappointed that I didn't receive some lunatic's writings with vivid imagery of what might come. But I knew what it meant. They weren't targeting me just yet... they were going after the people I cared for.

"And this is all they sent?" I asked, reading the line once more before tucking the paper into my pocket.

“No, accompanied with the letter was this,” Jane bent over, pulling out a cabinet drawer.

Inside, a taxidermied squirrel dressed in typical 17th-century female’s clothing waited—around its neck, a noose, as an example of what was to come for the Dench family soon enough.

“It was hanging from the mailbox, with your letter between its fingers. I managed to hide it from the children; they’re none the wiser to what’s happening here,” Jane said.

“What about your husband?” I asked, leaning against the counter.

Jane removed the squirrel, putting it into a trash bag and handing it to me.

“He’s an absolute mess because of this. Who wouldn’t be in his position? His entire world is being threatened by an unknown entity, for unknown reasons, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” I replied, trying to set her mind at ease. I filled Jane in on the details that Aaron managed to pull about the incident and how her family was killed. After a brief explanation of who we thought might be the culprits, some twisted cult, I was left with the biggest news of all.

By the time I finished explaining it all, Jane’s eyes showed fear far worse than any she’d felt up until then. Her face twisted and contorted with sadness, rage, and everything in between.

“You’ve also got a brother, Jane. A man named Spencer Williamson. You weren’t much younger than him when all of this happened, and you were separated during the adoption phase.”

“A brother?” she repeated, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth. She sniffled, trying her hardest to stay composed.

“Yeah, and from what I hear, he’s a good man. Got a wife, some kids, living the good old-fashioned American dream.”

“How did you find out?” she asked.

“That’s a funny story,” I chuckled, trying to break the tension, realizing immediately this was no time to laugh. “A colleague and old friend is working on the same case, just with your brother instead of you.”

“They’re going after him too?”

“It looks like they’re going after anyone that shares your blood.”

I paused, watching the cogs in Jane Dench’s brain fire off. Until now, she’d shown little in the way of breaking composure. Every action she took and step she made hid the emotions apart from subtle microexpressions or ticks across her face. This news, however, that she had a brother out there in the world, left feelings sprawling across her features.

They were a mix of happiness and sadness, all blended into a weak smile. Her eyes told a thousand stories, betraying any attempt to keep calm. She twisted and turned, back and forth between the kids and me, and her body gave away another hint of doubt.

Jane Dench was terrified, she was sad, and this whole ordeal took everything out of her.

“We’re going to find the people doing this, Jane,” I said, extending a reassuring arm, tapping her shoulder. “Nothing’s going to happen to you or the children. That much I can promise.”

She forced another fake smile, but once more, her eyes betrayed her. She didn't believe a thing I was saying.

"Thank you, Jack," she was almost whispering. "I have full faith in you and your agency."

~

I arrived home that night intending to get into bed with a whiskey bottle, drinking until I fell asleep. After making my ascension up the four stories by elevator, walking down the hall to my corner unit, I saw it.

On the door handle into my apartment, a taxidermied squirrel hung. Unlike the one from Jane Dench's house, this one was dressed more like me than a witch from the 17th century. The small coat and fedora sent shivers down my spine. Clutched inside the squirrel's hands was an envelope with what I presumed was another threatening letter.

Removing the squirrel and getting inside, I took the letter with me to my home office. Switching on the desktop, I scoured through the footage from my front door camera.

The footage displayed the same fat man in his mail delivery outfit stopping outside my door. His face, this time, was covered in a single wrapped scarf. He hovered over the door, attached the squirrel, and walked off. The hallway was empty after that until I arrived over an hour and a half later.

That was good, I thought. No one else had to witness the atrocities of what was happening here.

Once my investigation at the front door was complete, I went through the letter. Scared to open it at first, with the possibility that there might be some unknown, lethal substance on the paper, I tossed it over in my hands. Finally, presuming that these men wouldn't have done this had they

wanted me dead—knowing full well that they could’ve finished that off at Jane’s place—I pulled the letter open.

Once more, inside the envelope, was an off-white sheet. Soft to touch, yet firm, I saw my name inscribed on the outer page. Opening it, I was greeted by the madman’s beautiful calligraphy:

Detective Jack Mercer.

There comes a time in every man’s life, a pinnacle point in the long-standing traditions of his history—life and death, flight or fight, stand strong or cower. You’ve been given a simple choice, Jack Mercer.

Will you stand up against us and die? Will you stand up against us and lose everything? Will you believe in a greater good and succumb to the greatest evil?

You’ve been warned, Detective.

The letter, much like the last, meant little. It said no more than it had to, but still, they delivered it to my doorstep. Another attempt at a scare tactic.

But what these men didn’t know about me was that I rarely backed down from a fight. And if they were going to make these threats, they better have had a damn good plan on how to bring me down.

The following morning, I managed to get access to the apartment complex’s cameras. No one questioned my authority once I showed my badge. The doorman managed to speak with the man, if only briefly. Still, he didn’t catch a name or reason for being there other than to deliver a significant parcel.

Not asking too many questions, he let the delivery man up.

The deeper I delved into it, the more interesting I was finding this case. From nothing at all to personal attacks,

this network of assailants managed to sneak by and operate both day and night.

But as interesting as it was, I knew the others weren't going to share the same excitement as I did. They'd be terrified of the men threatening their lives.

Chapter 9

Jack

After my morning adventure, going through the footage and finding out more, I went to the agency office. To my surprise, Gwen was already sitting there, chatting with Lauren, both of them holding a cup of coffee.

After the previous night's adventure, I thought she might've wanted out. I knew Gwen, and I knew how little patience she had when moving forward on a case. I wouldn't put it past her to find my slow and steady methodology tedious. Yet, having her there that morning set my mind at ease. She was in it for the long-haul, not wanting to break out independently and instead work with a team.

Maybe it was her age; going solo these days was a near-impossible task. That's something that pained me to learn, knowing I had to bring someone else in. That's why Aaron formed part of my team now, anyway. Still, the thought of putting someone else's life at risk never sat well with me.

Though he knew what he was getting into, if anything happened to Aaron in the field, I'd be to blame. I knew that was a gentle approach to a situation that wasn't as severe as I made it out to be. Still, I was used to always doing this my way, where the only person that could get hurt was me.

I guess that's why I rarely took him into the field, too. Stationing him behind a desk, doing the mundane desk work on cases.

"Morning, ladies, Aaron," I said, realizing that they were all too lost in conversation or work to notice my arrival.

“Good morning, Jacky-boy,” Gwen said, winking at me from across the room.

“How’s everyone doing today?” I asked, tossing my coat and hat over the rack beside the door.

Apart from the usual *doing good* or *can’t complain*, Gwen rose from her chair. She stuck her hand in her red handbag hanging from one shoulder and drew two letters.

“I know,” I said, not even having to see them. “I got them too.”

“And your crew?” Gwen asked.

“I’m about to let them know.”

On hearing what I said, Aaron and Lauren stopped what they were doing and turned to me.

“Let us know what?” Lauren asked.

“Well, we’ve found ourselves in a bit of a pickle. As I’m sure Gwen already knows having spoken directly with Spencer, whoever’s chasing after Jane Dench has us in their sights too,” I said, walking over to the visitor’s section and taking a seat on a small, flimsy chair. “I’m not trying to alarm anyone with this news, and I don’t want you two to panic, I just think it’s best that we clear the air and everyone knows the situation we’re in.”

“What *exactly* is the situation?” Aaron asked, steepling his fingers.

He sat in his chair, facing Gwen and me. Lauren was on her feet, moving her weight between one foot and the other. Both tried to hide their feelings of fear for what I was about to say, and both failed. How could I blame them?

“I received a letter of my own last night. The first came from Jane, who handed me a note, and the second was waiting as I arrived at my door. The messages are coming through more brazenly now, and they’re leaving hanging

squirrels on doorsteps as a sign to show what's coming our way."

"And what does this mean for us?" Lauren asked, swallowing hard.

Out of the four of us, Lauren was the furthest removed from this lifestyle. She had a place in the office, sure, and she helped with cases, but she wasn't a detective. Nor did she have any further training if anyone did come knocking at her front door. So, her fears made me uncomfortable, knowing that I could make all the promises in the world, but she wasn't a fool. She'd been there when I was successful, and she knew how small my failure rate was... but still, she knew it.

I knew that might sway her judgement when asking her to stay calm.

"I'm hoping it won't have any impact on any of us. If anything, I'd be the first target, maybe Gwen, but I don't think that you have anything to worry about. Nor do I mention this to scare you, either. I just think it's better that we all stand together on this one and we don't start making brash judgements because of threats," I replied.

I didn't actually think anyone would do anything foolish, not that I even knew what a thoughtless action would be in this situation. I rarely did anything different apart from smoke more and drink less when I found myself on a case like this.

"Jack, I know you've got our best interests at heart, so you don't have to worry about me," Lauren said, giving me a smile. It nearly melted my heart.

"Of course, and that goes for everyone else in this room, too. As long as I'm still here, kicking and screaming, nothing will happen to any of you," I looked at Gwen, who rolled her eyes with a little grin.

“Now, I’m not saying it’s not appreciated, Jack, but let’s face it,” she chuckled, collapsing into a chair next to me. “I can take good care of myself.”

“Lions hunt in packs for a reason,” I said, giving Gwen a wink. “That’s what we’re doing here anyway, right? Fighting for justice and making sure that the innocent lives around us make it through the night without a hitch.”

“And we’ll do it, no matter the cost and risk,” Gwen replied.

With hopes that I set everyone’s minds at ease, we all went on with our day. Aaron, once more searching for anything else he could on this elusive case, Lauren going about her business, and Gwen and I trying to figure out anything we could.

We were old-school detectives in that way. Working on logic, reasoning, and deduction, moreover than trusting what the internet had to offer. Together, we sat, analyzing the tapes I collected from the hotel. After showing it to Gwen, giving her the man’s face that left the squirrel, we called Aaron in too.

Not only was this a way for him to learn more about the trade, but perhaps he had ways to track down the man by the image displayed. It was somewhat blurry in the cheap, black and white video from the apartment cameras, but it was something.

“He’s a fat sack of shit,” Gwen said suddenly after viewing the tape a second time. “There’s no way he gets in and out of places without being seen by people.”

“It’s not about that, right?” Aaron replied. “We know what he’s doing, so we’d know to look out for him. But that doesn’t mean it would carry over in the mind of anyone else seeing him. When 40% of the population is overweight, it’s

easy to overlook a man dressed in uniform and think him normal.”

“No one’s going to look at the blue outfit and think he’s a part of the problem, either. There’s been an outbreak of soldiers getting false valor lately, so who would look twice to see if a mailman’s outfit is up to code?” I added.

“I’ll see if I can dig anything up on the man in the video,” Aaron said. “Just forward it through to me and I’ll get started.”

“Thanks, kid,” I said, doing as instructed. He got up from the visitor’s chair beside Gwen and left the room.

“I should be heading out, too,” Gwen said, picking herself up and gathering her things.

“Where you headed?” I asked, following her to the door.

“I’ve got a few people to see about this case. A couple might have an idea of what we can do next,” she replied, keeping it cryptic on purpose.

Knowing Gwen all the years I have made it easy to deduce what she meant. Unlike me, a man who always stayed on the right side of the law, Gwen Sullivan often found herself on whichever side best suited her needs.

Though I rarely thought her a criminal to any degree, she had access to a network of rather dangerous people. As curious as I was, I decided not to ask any follow-up questions.

“I’ll call you if I hear anything,” she said.

“Stay safe out there, Gwen,” I replied.

She gave me a hug before departing on her own adventure.

Chapter 10

Gwen

A cool breeze blew through the empty parking lot of the Rio Grande Motel. The only car next to mine was a 1988 Cadillac Broughman in metallic red. I knew the car, the make, the model, and the number plate like the back of my hand.

The car belonged to Tito Lang. Once, one of the most powerful crime bosses in all of New York, reduced to a nothing after his time in prison. That's where the movies and TV got it wrong—there was no taking care of someone once they went behind bars. They were treated like every other inmate in the joint, no matter their position in the real world.

As instructed, he rented a room on the second floor, leaving a light on. I rarely used his *services* lately, but with his age and experience, I thought he might be useful on this case. The Crossley Killings happened back in the 1980s, after all, back when Tito had a hand in every shady deal across New York City.

Approaching the door carefully, I reached for the gun on my hip—not to draw but to make sure it was there. Tito Lang had a history, especially with cops, and I wasn't going to risk it. Just because he was good to me in the past didn't mean that wouldn't all change at the drop of a hat.

Putting three hard knocks on the door, I waited for Tito's call.

"Come in," he said.

Looking up and down the narrow walkway between the rooms, making sure I wasn't followed, I stepped into room

1309. As I pushed in, I was greeted by a man holding a shotgun, far too young, strong, and handsome to be Tito.

"Easy there, soldier," the words left my lips. Still, I rose my hands into the air, showing I wouldn't try anything funny.

"Ah, Miss Sullivan, it's you," Tito said from an armchair across the room. He mumbled something in Japanese, and the shotgun dropped from my chest to the ground.

"You not tell your dog I was coming in?" I asked, eyeing the gunman. I always liked to learn people's faces if I needed them for something in the future. "And you've known me longer than most, I hate being called *Miss Sullivan*."

"A man such as myself can never be too careful of those who hide in the shadows," Tito replied. He gave me a brimming smile that stretched from ear to ear. His crooked, yellow teeth unsettling me to the core.

Tito must've been leaning into his 70s by now, if not already beyond that threshold, and somehow, he still looked young enough to be considered middle-aged. His skin was smooth, without a wrinkle in sight, while his hair was the only indicator of his age. He had a long Fu Manchu mustache that ran down his chin to his chest. He was thin, unusually so, and the tiny wifebeater wrapped around his body billowed in the wind.

Somehow, this was the man that once ruled New York.

"And anyway, I've got people coming around once we're done. I just wanted to make sure that they weren't early," he waved the comment off like it meant nothing. I wondered if I'd hear about a murder at the Rio Grande Motel in the news the next day but decided not to worry myself unnecessarily. I was here on business, and if he was too, so be it.

The motel room was a grim reminder of what lower-class living and divorced fathers looked like. The stained beige carpet, old and worn furnishings of a coffee table, two chairs, and sofa, topped with a box-style TV were depressing. All the colors looked muted, and the echoey void of despair that filled the room was heart-wrenching.

"Look, I've got a couple of questions, and then I'll be out of your hair. I don't want to be around for your... business," I said, awkwardly walking to one side of the room. I contemplated leaning against a wall for a moment and decided against it with the caking filth on it.

"Questions?" he inquired. "You know how this goes, Gwen. I only answer questions that can't get me in trouble."

"I know how our agreement works. That's why I don't care what you do here later, nor what's going on in your day-to-day life. Hell, that's why I ignored the shotgun pointed at my breasts a second ago," I sniffed.

"Good, then ask away," he replied, rolling a hand for me to keep them coming.

"I'm struggling on a case, one that's got roots that are buried pretty darn deep," I looked him in the eye. Somehow, the thought of me struggling brought a sparkle of joy to his eye. "A family was killed a good few years ago now, in the 80s, they were called the Crossley's. They had two kids, a boy and a girl, both of them left to shelters when the parents died."

"I do not hear a question," Tito replied.

"Well, do you know anything about it? I'm not saying you were, hell, I don't care if you were, but do you remember anything about those murders? You were around then, had your finger in the pie of most operations. I just want to know if you might have something for me."

I gave him as many details of the case as I could to try and kickstart his memory. From all accounts, it looks like this case was swept under a rug and forgotten about. But a man that lived through it might've had something more to tell.

He didn't reply right away, tilting his head and searching his brain for an answer. I don't know why Tito Lang was my first thought when it came to this case. He usually helped me with street thugs or drug busts—rarely anything else. But most of my contacts were young up and comers, more so than old-timers looking for a couple of bucks thrown their way. And if it took Jack and Aaron as long as it did to find any answers on this case, I couldn't pretend that anyone else might know anything.

Thinking about it, Jack and I were alive during the 80s, and even we didn't know anything about this case. There was only a hopeful wish that the oldest member of my *staff* would have anything to say on the case. If not, it was a wasted trip to the middle of nowhere and a few uncomfortable minutes in a horrible room.

"You know, I do remember something about that case," Tito said suddenly, after his uncomfortably long pause. "There were a group of people, called themselves the Order of the Phoenix, or something stupid like that. I don't know much about them, but their leader came to me for the good stuff."

Tito gestured to his arm as if injecting a needle into it. "Said it helped him focus, helped him think, and helped him speak to God."

He shrugged his shoulders, getting up from the armchair, walking from one wall to the other and back again. I waited for him to keep speaking, seeing on his face that he wasn't quite finished yet.

“He’s not the kind of man you’d meet and forget, or meet twice for that matter,” Tito added, looking over to his muscle. The muscle, dressed in a tight black shirt, wearing sunglasses at night with a toothpick sticking out of his mouth, just shrugged his shoulders. “But that’s all I can remember, anyway. I don’t even know if that’s who you’re looking for, but their little group went quiet after my first meeting with them. They made some noise, annoyed some people, mainly the cops, and vanished off the face of the earth.”

The Order of the Phoenix, I thought to myself. Sure, that could’ve been them, but really, that could’ve been anything—some small group trying to kickstart a gang that never went anywhere. Of course, a leader of some shadowy cult-like organization would want drugs, and he’d reason it out. However, he chose to make those around him believe that his addiction was anything but.

It wasn’t enough to go by, and I felt a crushing disappointment not getting any more. We had a taste of what was to come, and I thought that maybe we’d have a little more. But Tito spent most of his life in prison, and the rest of it hopped up on some drug. How I thought he’d be of any real help was well beyond me.

“Thanks, Tito,” I sighed, making my way to the door.

With hopeful dreams dashed, I gave Jack a call and let him know that my search had no yield. His slurring words were enough to tell me that tonight was not the night for a chat about the case.

Chapter 11

Jack

The heavy thudding on my front door shook me out of my dream.

It was peaceful in the dreamscape. I was driving down the road with Gwen by my side, fingers locked in the center console. There was a panic in the streets, with a meteor descending to earth, a long green fire chasing behind it. We drove a simple car, a white Kia Picanto, with number plates that didn't match any I'd seen before.

The world was coming to an end, but I found no fear, not with Gwen by my side and not on that road. I watched as the meteor came to the precipice of crashing, and my heart was filled with nothing but glee. For the first time in far too long, I was happy.

That serenity washed away at the sound of my door. The panic that jolted through me had me grabbing the revolver underneath my pillow and on my feet in seconds. I walked to the door, stopping for a moment to look back at the bed. In an instant, I yearned to return to the world that crumbled around me but experience that contentment. I wanted that happiness, not the feeling of dread that struck me now.

With a sigh, I pulled on my grey robe and made my way to the door. Checking a digital clock in the kitchen on passing, it was a little after 5 AM.

The sound of traffic piling up outside my window with honking horns could be heard, even from here. I expected the worst, holding my gun tight, finger on the trigger, ready for whoever was waiting outside. My gut instinct told me

that this was going to be someone ready for blood. With all the threats that were sent my way, it wasn't impossible.

After sending their letters and threats, it was only logical that whoever wanted Jane Dench and Spencer Williamson would stop at nothing to get their way. With me standing in that path, I was the first on the list to get taken out.

But it wouldn't be the first time someone came knocking at my door, nor would it be the last, I believed.

As I approached the door, I heard the first sounds of whoever might be out there. It was a woman, crying. The knocking didn't cease until I stopped beside it, pressing the barrel of my revolver against the door and calling out:

"Who's out there?"

"It's Lauren," came the reply. "Jack, I'm scared and I need your help."

Without a second thought, knowing anyone might've been with her, I swung the door open. I swung the revolver haphazardly, clearing left then right and making sure no one was with her. Had there been anyone, I wouldn't have shot, but it was better to show anyone looking on that I was ready at all times.

Lauren looked at me, then the gun, and back at me. She was dressed up in her outfit for the day, a turquoise blouse and a long black skirt. Her face was already done up with makeup, accentuating all her features—the only difference than a typical day were the tear stains that ran down her cheeks.

"Lauren, what happened?" I asked, but before she said anything, she rushed into my arms. Still half-naked with only a loose robe around my shoulders, it was almost uncomfortable, but I gave her whatever comfort I could with a half-hug, the gun always pointed to the ground.

Lauren continued sniffing, shaking her head. I expected the worst, knowing very little elicited such a reaction in her. I gave her time, not questioning further, letting Lauren work through this at her own pace.

She pulled away from me when she felt ready, wiping her eyes with the length of her fingers. A weak smile appeared on her lips, and she cleared her throat with a cough.

"I'm so sorry," she said, shaking her head.

"You don't have to say sorry for anything, Lauren. Never, not to me," I replied.

I presumed it was the stress from what had been happening the last few days. Taking death threats on your shoulders was never an easy thing, and to someone that should have never been in the firing line, it was all the harder.

"They're going after my mother, Jack," she added, and the tears spilled freely once more. "I don't know what I can do about it."

Without warning, Lauren collapsed to her ass, bringing her knees up to her chest. I fell beside her, wrapping an arm around one shoulder, trying to comfort her in any way possible. She rested her head against my arm, never breaking the cocoon she created.

"What do you mean going after your mother?" I asked the question, expecting to wait. This time, Lauren gave no pause.

"After getting ready this morning, heading for the door, I saw an envelope pushed under it," she explained, rather eloquently for someone weeping. "There was no letter, no threats, just pictures."

She took a moment to find the strength to break away from her almost-fetal position before searching through her

handbag. From it, she pulled an envelope, the same as all the rest. It read: *'Lauren Becket - A warning.'*

Scattering the contents out onto the kitchen floor, ten polaroids fell to the ground. They ranged from different times throughout the day, but each showed Lauren's mother in some way.

Lauren's mother, Anastasia Becket, lived on her own in a small condominium in the city. On the first floor, she had a small garden. The photos were mostly taken from outside, looking into her home. Either with her caretaker or alone during the morning, afternoon, and night.

None of them were particularly threatening apart from the last. The final picture in the collection was taken from inside Anastasia's bedroom, late at night. She slept, at least that's what I hoped, while the photographer snapped the photo of her.

It's no wonder Lauren was in such a panic.

"Lauren, it's going to be okay. Have you called to check in on your mother?"

She nodded her head, breaking away from my grip. "I called her as soon as I saw the pictures. She's okay, if not a little annoyed that I woke her up so early."

Lauren chuckled uncomfortably, trying to break the tension. She tried to save face and keep a happy smile, even though the situation turned dire.

"That's a good start," I said, getting back to my feet.

I wanted to try my best to comfort her further, but I didn't know how. This was unknown to me, and in my time, there was rarely anyone that targeted those around me. No one had a personal grudge against Lauren, no matter how involved she got in a case. So this uncharted water was

terrifying. I knew that I had to help her, but I had no way of doing it.

"I don't know what to do, Jack," she said, her face twisted with another bout of tears readying to spill. "If anything happens to her because of me, I'd..."

"I'll make sure that your mother stays safe, Lauren. I promised that I wouldn't let anything happen to any of my crew, and I meant that," I said before she ran off with further dark thoughts.

"I know," she said, getting back to her feet. "I just didn't know what else to do. Got sent in a spiral of panic and knew you'd be able to pull me out of it."

"You know you can come to me anytime you want," I said, watching as she collected her things, picked up the photos from the ground, and made way for the door. "If you want to stick around for a bit, you don't have to rush off either. Take it easy, I'm here for you."

"I don't want to be more of a bother than I've already been," she said, opening the door.

We said our goodbyes and she left.

The second she was gone, I breathed out a sigh of relief. Though I didn't want to show it to her, I was terrified. I couldn't let anything happen to Lauren's mother, not because of something I was involved in. But my options were limited in what I could do.

Returning to my room, I got my phone and made a call to Hank Stamos.

It rang twice and he picked up. I knew that no matter what time of day I called, Hank would always be ready.

"Jack, what's going on? You alright?" he asked, rather frantically. I supposed the 5 AM call would worry anyone, let alone the chief of police in New York.

Hank Stamos and I went way back. We both started our careers around the same time, and where he went up the chain of command within the NYPD, I found my way into personal detective work. Being partners once, we had an almost inseparable bond, and more than once, we got each other out of hot water.

"Hank, yeah, sorry to bother you this early. I'm in a bit of a pickle," the words left my lips, not realizing the implications it might have on his thoughts.

"What's wrong? Where are you? I'll get a car down to you immediately," he near shouted.

"No, no, it's nothing like that," I replied, trying to calm him down. "I've just got a personal issue at work that's moving onto my staff. You remember Lauren?"

"The redhead working your front desk? How could anyone forget that bombshell," he said. I suppose he thought the threat wasn't as bad since it wasn't directed at me.

"Yeah, her. Look, we've got a situation with a case I'm working on. Some high profile stuff that's reaching all the way back to the Crossley murders in the 1980s," I almost hoped dropping the name would get Hank's cogs firing and he could give me some insight.

"Crossley murders? Never heard of them," he said, dashing those dreams. "But yeah, what's up? And it better be damn important if you're waking me up in a panic before sunrise."

He laughed, so I knew it was all in jest.

"Whoever we're chasing is threatening Lauren's mother. They've got a picture of her from inside the house while she's sleeping. I'm not sure who they are or what they want, but I need you to help that poor woman," I said.

“When did this happen?” His jovial nature immediately shifted to serious once more.

“Not sure, but over the last few days. The threat is serious.”

“You point me in a direction and I’ll make sure we have eyes on at all times. I know you wouldn’t screw me around with something like this, Jack, so I won’t question it further. But this will be off the books,” Hank replied.

I knew what he meant. A personal friend asks for police protection; it might look bad on the chief’s record.

“Of course, Hank. Hey, who knows, you might be able to find something on a cold case that’s seemingly disappeared from existence in the last 30 years,” I chuckled.

“Well, I’m going to catch a few more hours. I’ll dispatch a car in the morning and make sure there are eyes on her as often as possible.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said, the smug grin growing at the corners of my lips. “We all know how you get when you don’t have enough sleep, you big baby.”

Hank just laughed.

“I’ll talk to you soon, man. We should make plans sometime, Betty and the kids are missing their uncle Jack.”

“Maybe after this case, I’ll treat you all to a steak dinner.”

“Sounds good, man,” Hank said. “We’ll make plans then.”

I said goodbye, and we cut the call.

At least that was one thing taken care of. I didn’t want Lauren worrying about her own life and have her mother to worry about.

Chapter 12

Jack

Getting back to the office, I was surprised to see Lauren sitting at her desk. No signs of crying remained on her face, and had she not come to me, one might think it never happened.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, giving her a hug. She accepted, lingering a little longer than usual.

“It’s where I work, isn’t it?” she teased.

“I thought you’d at least take the day off or something regarding the situation. I didn’t expect you in, anyway,” I replied. “But I’ve got it all covered. Spoke with Hank Stamos this morning and he’s going to make sure that there’s always a watchful eye over your mother.”

“Thanks, Jack,” she said, gesturing her head over to Aaron and Gwen, standing over the computer. I knew she was telling me to keep quiet on the situation, never wanting to be a bother.

Nodding my head, I pulled away, poured myself a glass of orange juice, and greeted the others.

“You’re in early today,” Gwen said, checking her watch.

“Am I?” I replied.

“I’ve never seen you at the office before 11 AM,” she quipped.

“Well, it’s been a hell of a morning,” I sipped my juice. “What’s got you two hovering over a screen like this, or am I just being hopeful?”

“Well, I managed to find something on the mailman that delivered the letter to your door. Going through your footage was pointless, but I went back to your building and got some other cameras around the apartments. After a long search, through hours of nothing, I found this...”

Aaron hit the spacebar and the video started playing. There was little at first. Just a few cars passing by or people in the streets. But it was late, so everything was more or less empty. That was until a Chevy Impala pulled up to the apartment complex. That’s when he stepped out, the sack of shit that’s been terrorizing not only me and my crew but Jane Dench too.

“That’s him,” I pointed at the screen.

“It gets so much better,” Aaron said.

The moment the mailman stepped out of the apartment and got back in the car, Aaron slowed the video down to a tenth of the speed. It moved slowly until a certain point, where Aaron started moving the video himself, only now, frame by frame.

I didn't see it at first, but the second the car pulled out of the parking spot, the number plate was visible for a brief few seconds.

“Holy shit, you got him,” I could feel the excitement ready to spill out.

“Yes... well, no. The car’s not registered to a man, it’s registered to a woman named Delores Carlisle. The car was reported missing a few weeks ago. Now, I don’t want to say this is anything, but it’s something,” Aaron replied.

“And this Delores Carlisle, have you been in touch with her about the car?” I asked.

“I’ve given her a call, but she didn’t pick up. I only found this a few hours ago, so I’m guessing she hasn’t gotten up,

or she's busy getting ready for work. That being said, she works just down the road from here, so maybe you can pay her a visit?"

"It's a stolen car, right? What hopes are there that she's going to know anything about it?" I questioned. Aaron wouldn't have made mention of this without having a plan in his back pocket.

"Well, there are a few things, actually. Delores Carlisle is an older woman; she had three kids in her life, two died a couple of years back while the last is still alive. There's little information about him online, but he's not exactly a model citizen from what I could find. One of those strange loner types," Aaron continued. "Delores put up the stolen car with the police, and then it seemingly vanished a day later. I'm guessing she found out who took it and decided not to investigate further. On top of all this, too, why would he take the plates off when going after Jane Dench, but have them on for you? I really don't think it's just a case of a stolen vehicle... there's so much more to it than that."

"The kid's got a point," Gwen said, shrugging her shoulders. "It all adds up too well to think that Delores is just letting this slide. No claims to an insurance company, no attempt to retrieve the vehicle... at least there's an avenue to pursue with this one."

"You're right, it's a lead and we should pursue it," I said, shrugging. "I'll take care of that. You carry on looking and see if you can dig anything else up on this case, alright?"

"Got it, boss," Aaron said.

I finished the glass of orange juice, preparing to go out into the world once more. At least I hadn't taken off my jacket or hat yet.

"Jack," Gwen called after I set my glass down on the counter.

“Yes?”

“I wanted to ask you about something. Spencer wants to meet his sister and I’m not inclined to say no. They might find some kind of strength in each other, knowing that they have each other in these troubling times.”

I cocked a brow, shaking my head.

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea,” I replied.

“Why not? They’re going through this together and they’re both suffering. Both Spencer and Jane know about the other but have no way of getting in touch with each other. They deserve it...” she sighed. “They deserve it because what if something happens to one of them and the other is left knowing they had a sibling, but they never got to meet them?”

“It’s not the right time, and you know it too,” I shook my head. “You’re putting two people, who are both in very volatile situations, in the same room. They might think it’s what they need right now, but they need to focus on survival. You don’t want to give either of them too much hope for the exact situation you just listed.”

“That’s cold-hearted—”

“No, it’s really not. It’s logical. By letting the two of them meet, you’re putting an external burden on both of them. Now, it’s not a fight to make it through this, it’s what about the other? Jane Dench is a strong woman, or at least she wants to be, but you’ll be twisting her hand. She doesn’t know Spencer Williamson, and she doesn’t need to. If those two families meet, we’re going to have much worse on our hands than just threats, don’t tell me you haven’t thought about that,” I replied.

“I have, and I don’t care,” Gwen shut me down. “Sometimes you have to do what’s wrong to make sure that things go right.”

“Like speaking to a shady drug dealer in a motel out in the middle of nowhere? How well did that go for you again?”

“That’s different and you know it,” Gwen replied. All eyes were on us now. I didn’t know if Lauren and Aaron knew about Gwen’s shadier side, but at this point, it didn’t really matter either.

“Please, enlighten me on how it’s different. Putting yourself in the firing line to a known cop-killer because you want answers on a case,” I paused, trying to cool down a bit. “Look, I’m not arguing this. It’s a terrible idea.”

Gwen sighed.

“Well, it’s too late. I’ve set the meeting up for tomorrow at noon, and I’d really appreciate it if you could make it. It’s just going to be a small lunch in the city. Both Jane and Spencer are very excited,” she said.

I burst out into uncontrollable laughter. Even in my head, I knew it was frantic sounding, but it’s how I felt. Like the world around me was closing in, and it was ready to implode at any given second. Lauren, Gwen, and Aaron just looked at me with confusion stretched across their faces. This was no laughing matter.

“Why bother bringing it up with me if you already did this?” I finally asked as the laughter subsided.

“Because I knew you’d say no,” even though I just scolded her, Gwen still gave me an offhanded seductive wink.

“Tomorrow at noon, I’ll be there.”

I didn’t expect to see Gwen at the office when I got back from my interview with Delores. That was probably for the best, too. Still, I ventured into the early morning New York traffic in hopes of finding any scrap I could to benefit this case.

Chapter 13

Jack

Delores Carlisle worked in a dimly lit antique store that sold trinkets of all sorts. Nestled between two high-rise buildings, the store only got light from one front window. It reminded me of a horror movie, where a mysterious old man would work behind the desk, ready to deliver some information on the atrocity plaguing the main cast.

And in some ways, I hoped it held true. I wanted Delores to give me something, anything, that might benefit me on this case. We all needed a break in it, which could help us get one step closer to justice. This time, it wasn't just taking a toll on me, but everyone in my crew.

I'd never been so lost on a case. Not even when there was some strange draw, I always managed to find a way around the obstacles and bring down the criminals.

Delores Carlisle was my first and only saving grace.

The antique store had a simple layout. On entry, I was met by furniture, trinkets, old African masks, beautiful lamps, and ornate vases all around. They'd all collected dust over the years of never being purchased, and the sight of many sent shivers down my spine. Towards the end of the store was a single counter with a cash register atop it.

Much like the rest of the store, it was old. A single TV hung from a wall mount to the left of the register. It faced towards the back, where a door hung open with a light on.

Delores was singing a song when I entered. Some long-forgotten, 1950s love track that fell by the wayside to more

popular songs of the era. Her voice was shrill, off-key, and displeasing to the ear.

The TV, a cheap flat screen, played daytime soap operas. I guessed it the Days of our Lives, but I knew nothing about TV, let alone what bored housewives watched.

"Excuse me," I called over the noise. There was a bell at the front door that rung out with my entry, but over her own voice, I don't believe Delores heard me. She missed my first call too.

"Excuse me," I shouted louder. "I'm looking for Delores Carlisle."

She yelped in the back office, making noises as if she was almost dying. "I'm so sorry, I couldn't hear you over the TV."

I knew it was a lie.

Stepping out of the back office, Delores Carlisle stood no taller than my chest. Her neck was a pocket of fat that extended from her cheeks and chin, down to her chest, without definition. Her body was round, her face was wrinkled, and her teeth were stained a grey-yellow. Her lips were painted red, with makeup covering her face that wasn't near the right shade to her actual skin tone. Delores wore an oversized shirt that looked more like a dress and still somehow managed to be too tight, exposing rolls upon rolls.

In one hand, she held a cup of coffee, maybe tea, while the other held two danishes between the fingers. One oozed a red jelly from where a bite was taken out of it.

I felt sick just looking at her.

"Delores Carlisle?" I asked.

"That's me," her voice, still shrill and painful to listen to. "Who are you?"

She had a thick accent that I couldn't place. I almost put it somewhere out of the United States but didn't enquire on

it.

"I am Detective Jack Mercer. My secretary, Lauren, called this morning about my arrival," I replied.

"That's right," she said. "You wanted to speak to me about my car, was it?"

"I did. It's part of an active investigation into a case. From surveillance footage from my apartment complex, we tracked the car back to you," I paused for a moment, drawing my recorder from my pocket. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all," she said.

I turned the recorder on, setting it down on the counter before continuing.

"I was wondering if you have any idea who has your car? I understand that you put a report out on the vehicle being stolen a few weeks ago, only, not long after the whole case seemingly disappeared. What was the reasoning behind that?" I asked.

"Yes, it was my son who took it. He said he left me a note, and he wasn't lying. I only found it a few days after he told me," she snickered. "He's a little rascal, my Oscar, but I love him to bits regardless."

Delores seemed utterly oblivious to the situation. As if it hadn't clicked that her son might've been implicated in something far more severe than I was letting on. Knowing this, I decided to roll with it, rather than tip her off that he was a suspect in these crimes.

"And he still has the car now?"

"Well, I'd hope so. Otherwise, I've been taking the bus to work and back for nothing," Delores huffed, taking another bite of her danish. "Why? Did something happen to my baby boy?"

“No, ma’am, I don’t believe anything’s happened to your son. I was wondering if you could tell me more about him though? What does he do for a living? I don’t suppose he stays at home if he’s got your car, so I’m just curious to learn more about him.”

“My little baby, Oscar, is a writer,” she said, pulling her nose into the air. “A famous one at that. Did you know that a story he wrote was featured in a magazine?”

I couldn’t tell if she was oblivious to how the writing world worked or if she was just a complete moron. So far, however, all the boxes were being ticked.

Oscar left his mother a letter. He was a writer, which might’ve explained the ability to write in calligraphy. The car was in his hands. I couldn’t believe it, but I felt like Aaron helped make the first break in this case, and I felt relief washing over me already. Was this the start and end of all our problems? I had to hope so but expected the road to be far more winding than just that.

“Ma’am, I’d like to show you a picture now. Can you let me know if it’s Oscar?” I asked, drawing a crumpled sheet of paper from my pocket. From Aaron’s investigation into the footage, it was the clearest picture of the culprit he could find.

I handed it over to Delores and she brought it close to her chest. Her face sprawled with strange emotions of absolute joy at the sight of it.

“Yes, that’s my babe,” she said, her face glowing with delight. “Isn’t he just the most handsome young man?”

Delores’s face suddenly turned sour as she eyed me down. She set the half-eaten treat atop the other that already sat on the counter. Looking at the sheet again, I supposed it finally clicked that I wasn’t here asking about

her boy. I couldn't believe it took her this long to figure it out.

"What's this all about, detective?" she asked, her shrill voice turned threatening.

"Your son, Oscar, is threatening the lives of not only myself but multiple other families at the same time. I would urge your co-operation moving forward on this case. However, I'd understand if you'd like to exercise your right to remain silent," I replied, reaching for my recorder.

Delores snatched it up before I could get it. I didn't expect such agility and speed from such a rotund woman.

"I won't let you have it," she said, clutching the recorder. "If you don't have this, there's no admission of guilt."

She turned her nose up again as if she had the upper hand in the situation.

"You know that's not how this works, right?" I asked, cocking a brow. "I just came here to confirm what I already knew. That recorder isn't going to change a thing."

I couldn't take my eyes off my recorder. Though I was acting strong, I didn't want anything to happen to that thin slab of metal. In some peculiar way, it became my best friend over the years. I was never good with people, and though I wasn't a shy person, I never cared much for social interaction.

She eyed it, looking at the red blinking light, just the same as I did. I saw, from the corner of my eye, as her face twisted across a spectrum of varying emotions—rage, denial, grief, depression, and finally, acceptance that this was done. They all displayed across her face in a matter of seconds, and she dropped the recorder onto the counter.

Delores collapsed to the floor, the whole store shook at her weight, hitting the ground. She burst out into tears.

I collected my recorder, leaving it on but pocketing it.

“Delores...”

She wept into her cupped hands that barely covered her eyes and cheeks.

“I’m sorry about this,” I said. I was too. Delores was still a mother, trying to be proud of a son who undoubtedly lied through his teeth about where he was in life. But her obviousness to the situation would be his ultimate downfall, so I understood the emotions she faced. “Really, I am. I know what it’s like to feel lost and alone, abandoned by the world. But I want you to know that you’re not alone. Your son has committed these crimes and brought this onto himself. But you don’t have to think about it again, nor do you have to worry. You’re stronger than you could ever imagine.”

I didn’t know if my fortune cookie wisdom would help Delores through whatever anguish she felt. But I also didn’t have much else to give.

She stayed there, sobbing behind the counter. Saying nothing more, either because she was too afraid of the implications, or because this was practically over.

I left her there, knowing that I had something to go on now. And with a quick call to see where Gwen was, I prepared to bring Oscar Carlisle to justice.

Chapter 14

Jack

“So, Aaron pulled through after all?” Gwen asked, sitting smugly in the passenger seat of my Dodge Charger. She had her window cracked, letting out the smoke from my cigarette while we drove through the late evening streets of New York.

“I did, and if I didn’t know any better, that boy might think it’s his time to shine in the field,” I chuckled, ashing out my window. I hated the thought of letting him join me, a little bit more than having Gwen beside me that night.

It was so easy for something to go wrong, for someone to get hurt out in the real world, and I don’t know what I would’ve done with myself if something happened to someone because of me. But I wasn’t one to have a partner anymore, either. The idea of having someone else who relied on me was terrifying.

If it was just me, I was the only one in the firing line.

“You know, maybe it’s time to give him a shot. He’s clearly got the fundamentals down, and he’s not going anywhere behind that desk,” Gwen replied.

“And what, having him run off like you did after I got you into the field?” I teased.

“Well, look at what I’ve become since. Somehow, I even manage to pull some big cases like the living legend, Jack Mercer. If that’s not an accomplishment, I don’t know what is,” she replied, giving me a cheeky grin.

I thought about that statement for a while. Did anyone actually consider me a living legend? I couldn’t really

believe it myself. I was just some guy living out in New York City with the ability to find criminals that most struggled with. I didn't consider myself unique, nor did I want others to think I was either. I just had a knack for thinking outside of the box.

"He's not ready yet," I decided to get back on topic. I hated talking about myself or any accomplishments I might've received in years past. A detective is only as good as their last case—that's a motto I live by anyway. "He's going to make a mistake or get shot out there in the field, and then who's going to be around to help him?"

"You are, you dumbass," Gwen replied. "I'm not saying kick him into the deep end. Aaron's yearning for it, though, so take his hand and walk him through the shallows until he's ready to go about it himself."

"It's too dangerous," I shrugged.

The worst of it was, I knew she was right. I was too afraid of letting anything happen to my team that I'd never be ready to take him into the field. I didn't want the responsibility, nor did I want another man's blood on my hands. But Aaron was a good detective, especially on paper, so he'd undoubtedly kill it in the field.

I didn't let anyone onto this.

"Look, I can see you're uncomfortable, so I'll drop it. But, Jack, it's really something you should consider," Gwen finished on the matter. "That being said, let's start focusing. We're not far off from Oscar's home now."

"I know. Can you actually believe we managed to find something on this case? If I'm frank, I was starting to lose all hope and think it was a lost cause."

"You and me both," Gwen replied. "But now, our man's just a few miles away, and we're going to walk away with the satisfaction of bringing down a crazed lunatic."

"You think that's it? This one man's been causing so much havoc?" I asked, turning to her for a brief moment before setting my eyes back on the road.

"I don't know if I'm honest. A girl can dream, though, right?" Gwen replied.

"A girl can dream," I nodded my head.

I think we both knew that it wasn't true. That whatever the Order of the Phoenix was, it was more significant than just one man... even now, 30-odd years later. We wouldn't admit it, lest it bring a bad omen, but Oscar Carlisle was only a stepping stone to the greater plot.

"You think Delores made any attempts to get in touch with Oscar?" Gwen asked, after a few miles of silence.

I got lost to thought, and I supposed she did too, driving in the direction of Oscar's home.

"I'm gonna have to guess that she definitely did, yes. But it seems like a very one-way street between the two. Delores regards him to an extremely high level, while it appears that Oscar wants little to nothing to do with her. So, I'm guessing she gave him a call to tip him off that we were on the way, but he won't check her messages until long after. If anything, he'd be a little panicky by the time we get there rather than on the run already."

"Some interesting logic you have there," Gwen brought a hand under her chin. "You really think you know people that well to read a man you've never met?"

"Yes," a straightforward answer to a simple question. "We're also talking about a man that keeps taxidermied squirrels at the ready to dress up like anyone he wants. He rarely uses the internet, so what need does he have for a phone? You know, all those little things that build up a man's character..."

"Aren't those the ones that are usually a little too attached to their mothers? The Norman Bates types," Gwen asked.

I understood her concern and her doubts about trusting my gut instinct. And now, I realized, I was taking a somewhat enormous gamble on this by not sending a car ahead or making sure Delores stayed quiet.

"You're just putting doubts in my head, and I'm trying to focus," I said, shaking the thoughts away. I always trusted my gut before anything else, and it never once treated me wrong. Now, I was hoping today wasn't the first day.

"We're here now anyway," I said, taking the final turn into the rundown neighborhood where Oscar Carlisle lived. Most of the houses down the street looked abandoned, as if this was a ghost town rather than a prospering settlement.

Most of the yards were disheveled with dirt yards and tattered fences. Most houses had no lights on, with only a few that looked like candlelight. It was only the house furthest down the street, sitting on a corner with a car parked in the driveway. A Chevy Impala, with the same number plates Aaron ran.

Behind it, another dilapidated house stood. A light shined from the front window with no curtains blocking it. Inside, I could see him walking up and down with a newspaper in his hands.

Oscar Carlisle, dressed now in what looked like a black woman's nightgown, but the same man who delivered a letter to Jane's home while I was watching. The same man who'd been terrorizing my friends and their family. The same man that brought my world into a tailspin for the better part of two weeks.

My blood boiled at the mere sight of him.

“Jack,” Gwen’s voice distracted me. I stopped in the middle of the road at the sight of him and lost myself to deep thought. “Maybe we should pull over?” she questioned.

“Right, yes,” I said, driving a few houses up the road before pulling up to the sidewalk. Through the rearview mirror, I kept a constant focus on Oscar’s home.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay in there?” Gwen reached out and took my hand, clutching the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turned white.

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly. The thought of the threat on Anastasia Becket’s life hit me again and made me furious.

“If you’re not ready...”

“No, I’m ready. Let’s go,” I said. “Gwen, I want you to stay behind me, okay? We don’t know what’s going to happen in there, and I don’t think I could live with myself if I was the reason you got hurt.”

“Okay, Jack, I’ll stay behind you.”

“Then let’s get in there and end this thing,” I said, pulling myself out of the car. Gwen followed close behind as we approached Oscar’s home.

Chapter 15

Jack

Oscar Carlisle scattered around the house, from one end to another, without much purpose. Taking a moment to observe him from outside, we looked through the window with no curtains. There were no furnishings in his home, not that I could see anyway, with papers pinned to the wall.

Oscar was a short man, round like his mother, with a fading hairline. The patchy beard on his face felt fitting to his character. The black gown around his body was full of holes from cigarettes that he seemingly sucked back on one after the other.

Oscar was a mess, and maybe some time behind bars would sort him out, I considered.

He mumbled to himself, often shouting obscenities before maniacally laughing, then continuing on with whatever he was doing. I couldn't help but think he was writing more devilish letters for Jane, Spencer, or someone in my crew.

After our brief stop outside, watching him from the fence line, Gwen and I approached the front door.

"You think he's going to give us any problems?" she whispered into my ear.

"I don't," I replied. "I think he'll drop like a kitten the second we bust down the door."

Purely by the look of him, I saw a weak man. His enormous size had no strength behind it.

On the ride to his house, I had the delusion that it would end there that night. That we'd bust down the door and

bring Oscar to prison, he'd confess to everything, and this case would be over. But looking at him, the waste of space that occupied this dead street, I knew this was only the first stepping stone to ending this thing.

We walked slow and steady up the staircase, weapons drawn. I clutched my revolver in one hand, looking over to Gwen, who inspected her Colt M1911. When her check was done, making sure the safety was off, I pressed a shoulder against the wall beside the door.

"How are we going to do this?" she asked, following instructions to stay behind me.

"I guess we go in weapons drawn and get him in restraints as quickly as possible. Once he's down, clear the rest of the house and make sure that he doesn't have anyone else waiting to help. Don't open fire unless absolutely necessary," I replied.

"The textbook approach then?" Gwen winked. "Why didn't you just say that?"

I ignored the comment, staying as focused as possible. With a single deep breath, I pushed off the wall, bringing a boot to the handle. The door swung open without much give.

Keeping my gun in the air, focused on the entry door into the living room, Oscar's last known location, I shouted.

"Oscar Carlisle, you are under arrest under suspicion to harm Jane Dench and Spencer Williamson. Come out with your hands up."

I heard a heavy thud in the room over and approached with Gwen close behind. The first words I heard Oscar Carlisle say were, "I didn't do nothing."

Clearing left, then right, I fixed my gun on Oscar. Gwen did the same, clearing any corners I could've missed. Oscar

remained on his knees, eyes wide, shaking his head.

“I didn’t do nothing,” he said again, shaking his head.

“I didn’t do nothing,” he repeated once more and then over again in fast, short bursts.

Gwen kept her gun fixed on Oscar while I neared, tucking my revolver back into the holster and drawing cuffs instead. They barely clicked over the second notch on his large wrists.

“Oscar, is there anyone else in the house?” I asked.

He shook his head, never breaking the phrase *I didn’t do nothing*.

As expected, Oscar’s home had nothing in it. The living room was empty, barring a chair and a table, with the papers hanging from the wall. A small TV stood in one corner but received no station feedback, instead, running with a low hum and static display.

The papers hanging from the wall were previous drafts of letters that never got sent—many of them with red underlining in pencils, where mistakes in grammar or spelling stood. Most, but not all, were written in the same calligraphy that everyone involved in the case had seen up until now.

As instructed, once we detained Oscar, Gwen and I made our way through the house, clearing room by room. It was a terrible, two-bedroom house, and much like the living room, no other rooms were furnished. The bedroom, the only other with anything in it, had a pile of dirty clothes and a mattress without a base.

In the bedroom, there was a laptop that we collected for evidence to perhaps stand a chance to furthering this case. Now that I saw him in person, I knew that Oscar Carlisle

wasn't our man. He was just a poor fool, maybe down on his luck, trying to do something he believed in.

And if he was the mastermind behind it all, he sure as hell fooled me.

"Oscar, calm down," I said, entering the living room once the search of his house was complete. In our time away, he collapsed into a ball on the floor with his hands behind his back. Tears spilled from his eyes and he wailed passionately. "We know that you're not the one we're after."

"What do you mean?" he sniffed and snorted. By the way he spoke, I could tell there was something wrong with him. He wasn't a complete fool, but he wasn't wholly normal either—the long slurred, drawn-out speech, almost as if deaf without the hearing problems. I knew I could use whatever brain damage he suffered to my advantage.

"I know you're not the man I'm hunting here," I said. "You just got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. But I'm going need you to tell me who put you up to all of this."

I saw the switch in his eyes. As though he'd just seen a ghost.

"No, I can't do that," he shook his head frantically. "I won't do it, no."

He repeated the phrase, just as he did earlier.

"Then I'm going to have to take you to jail, man. I don't want to do that to you. You're just a kid trying to write your stories. You think they'll let you write in prison?" I dropped to bended knee, trying to appeal to Oscar.

"They won't let me write?" he looked up at me with puppy dog eyes, readying to spill once more.

"Of course not. That's what they do in prison—they take away the things you love," I said.

He nodded his head, opening his mouth to speak, and just when I thought I hooked him, Oscar shook his head. "I can't do it. I can't tell you. I can't, I shan't, and I won't."

"Jack, there's no point in pressing this further," Gwen said, tapping me on my shoulder. "I think it's best we get him down to the station and revisit it later."

Being so close to a breakthrough, I wanted it to happen. I was desperate for him to tell me who was behind it.

But at least I knew there was someone behind it after all. Oscar didn't give me a name, nor did he give me any further details to benefit my investigation. Still, he gave me enough to know that I wasn't crazy in thinking there was a more prominent player in this game.

Gwen and I booked Oscar Carlisle into the station, giving them somewhat express orders not to provide him with a pen and paper. Apart from that, they could process him usually until our return the following day for a follow-up interrogation.

Now, the chase was on, and it was only a matter of time until something big happened.

Chapter 16

Jack

"You know I still think this is a terrible idea, right?" I ran a hand through my hair, messing up all the work Gwen just did to make sure it was tucked right. I hid it under the fedora anyway, so there was no cause for concern.

"I do," she replied, letting out a heavy sigh. "But I think it's right. They're both going through this, and it's better to do it together rather than alone."

"Well, then, let's get in there and see how it goes," I said.

We sat together in the parking lot of a strip mall just outside the city. After the previous night's events, I knew it was the worst time to let Spencer and Jane meet, but I wasn't going to burst Gwen's bubble. She seemed excited about it.

Getting out of the car, we walked together into the Monte Carlo steakhouse. Jane and her husband sat alone, sharing a drink. They looked almost happy, probably on news that we made an arrest on a potential suspect. Again, I refused to take that away from them.

"Ah, you must be the detective, Jack Mercer," he said as we approached the table.

"That's me, yes."

He rose from his chair, extending a hand in my direction. "Lance Dench, a pleasure to meet you."

"Pleasure's all mine, Mr. Dench," I took his hand, shook it, and joined him at the table.

"And this is your... wife?" he inquired, greeting Gwen.

“Partner,” I replied. “She’s working on Spencer’s case, and the reason all of this is kicking off today.”

After the remainder of our greeting, ordering drinks, and relaxing for a moment, I saw him enter from the corner of my eye. He was tall with scruffy black hair and a beautiful brunette by his side. He was desperately pale, and the weeks of stress that had befallen him definitely showed their signs. His wife, Caroline, looked almost as uncomfortable as I did.

With a server in front of them, Spencer Williamson approached the table cautiously. I could see it in Jane’s eyes, the overspilling emotions of meeting her long-lost sibling all these years later.

I couldn’t help but look around to see if our drinks were on the way. This wasn’t a place for me. If anything, the siblings should have had this meeting alone. I was just some cop to them, a guy working a case, and being in the middle of some family gathering was a disaster in the making.

“Spencer?” Jane said, jumping out of her chair.

“Jane? It’s so nice to finally meet you,” they embraced in a hug.

Jane burst out into tears and Spencer was soon to follow.

Gwen had a wide smile on her face throughout the entire situation. For a short time, I could’ve sworn I saw tears in her eyes too.

I understood then that this wasn’t just about making the most logical play. Gwen was here, reuniting a family that lost each other over 30 years prior. This wasn’t some personal achievement of bringing herself some lost happiness; this was helping those around her through a difficult time.

I was never the kind of man to bring emotion into my work, and I never would be. It was these personal ventures

that ended up in further heartache rather than any true bliss. But sitting there that day, while Spencer and Jane became acquainted, I found happiness myself.

A twinkle of humanity in a world full of suffering.

This is why we did it, after all, why we helped those in need. It wasn't for personal gratification or happiness, but to see normal people being able to go back to the way their lives were. For Jane and Spencer, their lives would never be the same. Not after what happened and the threats they got, or the tragic events of their history.

"So, what's really going on here?" I leaned in close, whispering into Gwen's ear. "You going soft on me?"

"What? No, never," Gwen replied. "What makes you think that?"

She turned towards me, letting the siblings reunite in peace.

"I don't know... this doesn't seem like your style. I never saw you as the type to bring emotions into a case," I teased, leaning back in my chair.

"We're all getting older, Jacky-boy," she replied, blowing me a kiss. "Sometimes, age brings that soft spot youth overlooks."

"And us, here together? You don't think that's a sign of something else?" I winked.

The waitress interrupted us, setting our drinks down on the table. I could hear Gwen laughing behind her.

"No, I don't think it's a sign of anything," she said when the waitress stepped around the table to set down the other drinks.

"You know, we still make a pretty kick-ass team, you and me," I sipped my beer.

“We always have, that’s why I knew you were the right man to call when facing this little problem,” Gwen replied, bringing her glass to mine to cheers.

I considered it for a moment, bringing Gwen into my fold. I’d have preferred her back by my side rather than Aaron. Not that he wasn’t going to someday make a great detective, but at least with Gwen Sullivan, I knew she could hold her own. The thought of having her there, working side by side, was exciting.

And maybe that’s what all this was in some way. But unlike the many others I managed to read in the past, Gwen was a closed book. She left everything to the imagination, giving no signs at all.

We spent the afternoon with Jane, Spencer, and their partners, laughing and talking as though we were all old friends. For the first time since it started, I could’ve believed the case was solved and this was our celebratory meal.

But as time ticked on and the check made its way over, I came back down to earth.

Oscar Carlisle was sitting in an interrogation room waiting for me, and I was eager to crack that egg wide open.

Chapter 17

The Witchfinder General

It was a cold night, unusually so, even for an early autumn evening.

But with the icy chill of the wind came deathly silence from the streets as I entered Gwen Sullivan's abode. The lights were off and the house was dark, with only a single car rolling down the long road on which her three-bedroom home stood. After news broke that the detectives managed to arrest my underling, Oscar Carlisle, I knew it was time to get serious.

They had been running rampant, no matter the Order's threats against them, and I would not allow it to stand.

They called me the Witchfinder General, and thus far, I'd completed my duties without a hitch.

In the still of the night, I found a seat in her living room beside a large window. The curtains were drawn, with Gwen no doubt knowing she wouldn't be home before nightfall and not wanting to leave them open. How smart of her to ensure no eyes could peer in while she was away.

I sat still, almost motionless, like a lion on the hunt. The only movement that came, the subtle up and down of my chest from calm breathes drawn. Rarely did I blink, and even more so, make any movement at all.

That was until I heard her car in the driveway.

A strange delight filled me, hearing the metallic hum of her garage opening and the vehicle pull inside. Connecting

directly with the kitchen, I watched as the door swung open and the light flicked on. Still, I sat, shrouded in darkness.

“What a good day,” she said to herself, stepping into the light. A smile stretched from ear to ear.

My curiosity was piqued at the sight of the smile, the reason for her jolly nature, and why her day was so *good*. I knew someone would be able to tell me soon enough, having followed both her and Jack Mercer for the better part of the afternoon.

I was surprised to find that Gwen Sullivan had such a lack of awareness. How she managed to walk from one end of the kitchen to the other without spotting me, pouring a glass of wine and drinking it in the kitchen while playing on her phone.

Just look up, I thought. She’d no doubt have seen my ivory mask, the only color against the pitch-black ensemble. Yet, she never did raise her head nor pay attention to her surroundings. How easy it would’ve been to kill her.

Had this been a meeting to kill her, that was.

“Gwen Sullivan,” I finally spoke, growing bored of waiting.

Within an instant, her wine glass fell to the floor and her pistol was drawn, focusing on my general direction.

“Who’s there?” she called.

“I don’t believe there’s any need for a gun,” I said, getting up from my chair. “Nor do I think it’s a good idea, either.”

Taking my first few steps towards the light, from all around, my acolytes joined me. Hidden in the shadows, all the same as me, they appeared from every door leading into the kitchen. There were five of us in all, none wielding a weapon, all ready to die for our cause.

"If you'd be so kind, Gwen Sullivan, please do lower your weapon," her eyes scanned me from head to toe. Realizing that even if she managed to fire off and get even a few of us down, she'd not make it through the night, she holstered her pistol.

"Who are you, and what the hell are you doing in here?" Gwen demanded, pulling herself as close to the counter as possible.

"I am the Witchfinder General," I said. "And you've been a naughty girl. You've not heeded my warnings nor listened to my pleas of reason, and for it, you will suffer."

"I see how it is," she said, snickering to herself. Her stance almost instantly shifting from scared back to the bravery she displayed with the gun in her hands. "You're the piece of shit going after Spencer Williamson."

I shook my head. "I'm fulfilling an ancient duty to instill order and balance to the world. God has spoken, Gwen Sullivan, and he has given me my obligation. I must rid the world of the vile, the heathens, the scum, and I will stop at nothing to honor his order."

"You're killing innocent people because you're twisted," Gwen said, her hand reached for her weapon again. My acolytes approached her, steadily. She wouldn't clear leather before they grabbed her, and thus, her hand only hovered around the gun.

"You may believe whatever you wish," I raised a hand, and all four of them stopped. "But you cannot prevent the inevitable. We will allow God to judge those who have sinned, as I will someday stand before him."

"They're normal people with families and lives. You're trying to—"

"And who upholds this normalcy of which you speak? You don't know what happens behind closed doors, just as I

don't know what would happen if there were no protectors. My order is ancient, Gwen, and it will continue on for eternity, preventing the shadows from rising up and taking control. You're just too blind to see it," I cut her off.

I couldn't blame her ignorance. She was blind to it all and how the world worked in mysterious ways. I'd gone through the training to see the darkness. People like Jane Dench and Spencer Williamson were disgusting by nature. They were spawned from sin, from evil, and if we let them survive, the world would wither away.

I didn't expect her to understand, not in a single evening, but that's not why I ventured to her home.

"You know, one would think you'd be more careful of making sure your home was sealed tight before leaving in the mornings," I said, leaning against a low-hanging kitchen cabinet. "It's never good to be home alone."

"Are you actually trying to threaten me?" she scoffed.

"No, not at all," I smiled, though I knew she couldn't see it. "Not yet, anyway."

"Then get on with it. I don't have time for this nonsense," she spat.

"Such a feisty one. You might've done well as a witch hunter yourself, Gwen Sullivan," I sighed. "I'm only going to say this once. You and detective Mercer are going to cease your investigation into the Order of the Phoenix. You've caught your man, Oscar Carlisle, and that's the end of it. If this continues any further, the Order will be forced to take... severe measures."

Gwen stayed silent, eyeing the four men that surrounded her. I walked over to her, lifting the base of the shattered wine glass

"You are only let free this night so that you may further my message onto those closest to you. Do you understand?"

Gwen nodded her head.

"Good," I replied, running one edge of the glass against her cheek, not hard enough to cut. "There is no need for us to fight, Gwen Sullivan. I do not wish to stand against you or those you care for. I'm merely a vessel with the goals of accomplishing my mission. And in years to come, so will my son and his children to follow. Good shall prevail."

Without another word, my acolytes began heading for the front door. I followed close behind.

~

What the hell just happened? The thought ran through my head once the five men left my house. I knew we were dealing with at least one crazy when we picked up Oscar, but I was stunned to see these men in my place.

The second they were gone, I drew in a long breath, knowing how lucky I was to survive.

Grabbing my phone, I called Jack.

"Gwen, what's up? I'm about to head into the interrogation room with Oscar," he said.

"They were just in my house," I said.

"What? Who?" Jack shouted.

"Some guy calling himself the Witchfinder General, making more threats. They got into my house, Jack," I could hear the panic in my own voice. It made me uncomfortable.

I dropped to my ass, my breathing grew heavy.

"I'm on my way," Jack said.

"No, they're gone. Coming over will just be a waste of your time," I replied, knowing it was true. They weren't

going to come back tonight, and Jack had his own thing to take care of with Oscar.

“What did they want from you?” he asked.

I explained what happened, from start to finish. By the end of the explanation, I was already back on my feet, picking up pieces of the broken wine glass and wiping a cloth over the spilled wine.

“So, they’re still throwing threats out then? I guess we can only hope that Oscar is going to have something we can go on then,” Jack replied. “You’ve still got a key to my place, right? Why don’t you come over for the night? It’ll be like the good old days.”

The thought brought a smile to my face. I did have a key to Jack’s place, locked away in my safe. It was a small gesture he made back when we were far younger and far stupider than we were now.

“Sounds good,” I said, feeling tears well up in my eyes. “I’ll see you later.”

“Stay safe tonight, Gwen. I don’t want anything happening to you,” Jack replied.

“You too, okay?” I fought back the tears for as long as I could.

Once the call ended, I wept freely. And once I managed to compose myself, I collected the key from my safe and went over to Jack’s place, finding a good spot on the sofa, flicking through old movies.

Chapter 18

Jack

I was already at the police station when Gwen called to tell me that her home was broken into. I stood in a small room, behind a one-way window, where not a few feet before me, Oscar Carlisle sat. He fidgeted nervously, having been trapped in the bright, blinding interrogation room for nearly 20 hours now.

I hoped stripping him of all luxuries for a while would send him into a panic. That the idea of being thrown in jail would get him to start speaking and let me know what's going on with this case. But now? There were higher stakes on the line. These people managed to break into Gwen's house. I knew she had top-notch security after my own prodding to make sure she was safe years before.

And this organization, the Order of the Phoenix, managed to get in there without any issue at all.

They had to be damn good criminals, with a history in the more dubious acts, to pull something like that off.

"So, what's it gonna be, boss? You know we can't keep him there for more than 48 hours if you don't get something out of him soon," the police officer, Marshall Denton, said. He was my second in the interrogation, had I needed to bring another in for the good cop/bad cop routine.

He was a good man, having partaken in many an investigation with me in the past. I met him as a rookie on the force, trying to climb his way up the ladder, and now, he managed to hold the title of sergeant. He was built like a brick, with broad shoulders and a stocky frame. His skin was

tanned both by heritage and taking care of himself. His buzzcut black hair was perfectly fitting for an officer such as him.

“I’ll get something out of him tonight, don’t you worry about that,” I replied.

My thoughts were still on Gwen, however. I knew she was safe for the time being, that the Order only came to her to deliver a message, but I was still uncomfortable. I felt trapped, not only in that small room but mentally too. What kind of toll would something like that take on a person? I knew if I was in the same situation, it wouldn’t have ended so civilly.

But she was safe. I had to remember that. I never was and knew I couldn’t be emotional in a situation like this. If I let anything slip, going by the book, it would be my ass.

“We going to play this one nice and cool, or do you want some muscle right from the get-go?” Marshall asked, shoving the last bite of a pastry into his mouth.

“I think we take it slow. If I need you, I’ll give you the signal,” I replied. Marshall and I created a simple gesture that let the other know if they needed help—a peace sign shown to the perp before spinning one finger in the air.

In this situation, with a man like Oscar Carlisle already terrified and broken down, I knew it wasn’t necessary. He’d squeal the second I started hitting him with hard truths of what might happen had he not given up more secrets. But it had to be done quickly. I didn’t have time to dilly-dally and pretend that we were going to get through this whole ordeal alright. I needed answers, and I needed to bring people down.

Lives depended on it.

I made the short walk out of the office and stepped into the interrogation room.

It wasn't much bigger than the room me and Marshall sat in, but the blinding white light above our heads was far more uncomfortable than I remembered. There was only a single table in the interrogation room, with two chairs on one end and the culprit's seat on the other. Oscar sat there, hands cuffed to not inflict any self-harm. I was told he was prone to violent strikes to his face, near constantly while saying, *how could you be so stupid?*

In front of him, a can of soda and an empty McDonald's box stood.

"Oscar," I smiled, moving over to a chair opposite him.

"Hello," he said, trying to lift his hand and wave. The cuffs rattled in a little metal restraint on the table, pulling him forward.

"How are you today?"

"Better than yesterday, sir," Oscar replied, leaning forward and scratching his face. He had tomato sauce stains on his cheek from the burger he ate.

"That's good to hear. I understand you've had your lawyer come in and your rights read to you?" I inquired.

"Yup, a nice woman came in to tell me everything," Oscar said, almost blushing at the mention of the woman.

"Great, then we can begin. Look, I'm not going to mince words with you here... you're in a lot of trouble, Oscar," I let out a long, drawn-out sigh, trying to express the gravity of the situation. "Did you know that your *friends* paid the female detective that was with me yesterday a visit tonight?"

"What? No, I don't know nothing about that," Oscar shook his head. He started shifting and squirming in his chair in a somewhat frantic frenzy.

“Well, they did. And they made some pretty serious threats to her, too.”

“I just write letters and take them to people. I don’t know nothing else,” Oscar said again.

“Who tells you to write these letters, Oscar? And do they tell you what to write?” I asked. I never broke eye contact with him, even when he turned away or tried breaking my gaze.

I read his face like the open book that it was. The subtle changes in his expression, the way his eyes opened and closed at certain words, how his jaw sunk or clenched depending on what was spoken about. I could tell he wasn’t lying, that he didn’t know what was going on, but he also knew far more than he was letting on.

And now, with an admission of guilt that he delivered those letters—wrote them too—we had him for as long as we needed him.

“I don’t know—”

“Nothing?” I finished his sentence. “Then how do you know where to take the letters? Or who to send them to? Why are you so clued up on how the whole operation works if you really don’t know anything about it? Don’t play innocent, Oscar. You’re the mastermind behind this whole thing, aren’t you?”

With every accusation I sent his way, Oscar broke down a little. He was hurled into a further panic, now trying to break free from the bonds wrapped around his hands. He pulled so tight that the table bolted to the floor shifted at his attempts to get free.

“You know, they’re going to send you away for a long time, Oscar. The guys behind that window over there, they think it’s all on you. Look, I’m trying my best to be on your

side here, trying to get them to leave you alone, but you're not helping me here."

I could see it in his eyes. Oscar Carlisle was on the verge of breaking point.

"You just have to tell me who it is, and I can turn those dogs off your scent. So, come on, tell me what's going..."

"I don't know who it is!" Oscar shouted. "It's a man dressed in all black with a mask. The man comes to my house, gives me the names and the places, and tells me to write."

Oscar started blubbering and sputtering as the tears rolled down his cheek. He finally cracked.

"How do you know what to write?"

"The man says I've got a gift. A gift from God. That he speaks through my writing. I don't know how it happens... it just happens," he sniffled.

That made sense with the situation, but it still didn't explain his corrections and mistakes. I supposed that didn't have anything to do with the case and decided to ignore it for the time being, but I'd have to return if it came up in the future.

"So, you can't tell me anything about the man that comes to your house?"

Oscar shook his head.

Knowing that any further questioning with Oscar in his blubbering state was pointless, I got up from my chair. Though there wasn't much to go by from this meeting alone, at least it confirmed that it was the same man that attacked Gwen in her home.

In a case like this, baby steps were better than no steps at all.

Chapter 19

Gwen

Entering Jack's house after all these years was strange as if I'd stepped through a time machine that took me back ten years. The L-shaped black leather sofa, the blue and white TV cabinet and lampshades, the silver curtains—all unchanged after all these years.

After my scare, I didn't want to be home alone. It didn't matter if the masked man and his cronies weren't going to come back or how prepared I was for them if they did, I didn't want to be alone in that house. Instead, being out here in Jack's place felt right. He was always a protective rock when I needed it, and it seems little has changed.

Being alone in his place, I decided to make him a dinner. Nothing fancy, but when I went through the fridge and cupboards, I wasn't met with anything other than a few rudimentary ingredients for easy sandwiches or take-out boxes. So, with that plan out of the window, I opted for take-out myself—as a small 'thank you' for his kindness.

It wasn't surprising to see him living like this. Jack was never the kind of man that looked after himself. In some ways, I always hoped he'd find a woman, settle down, and relax. But he was a dedicated man who strived to better the world one case at a time.

I didn't know how long he'd be, so I curled up on the sofa, ate a couple of slices of pizza, and watched TV.

A few hours later, Jack stepped through the door. I hopped to my feet, and without needing to say a word, Jack

wrapped his arms around me. He brought me in tight, squeezing softly.

"Everything's going to be okay, Gwen. I promised you that, and I'll make sure it happens," he said.

I lingered there longer than I ought to have. Maybe I was going soft the older I got, but I guessed that sometimes everyone just needs a good, long hug.

"I'm feeling better," I said after pulling away from him. "It just came so unexpectedly."

"We're dealing with a bunch of freaks and screw-ups, I guess it was only a matter of time until they made a real threat," he replied.

"But what does that mean for everyone else? I could've defended myself, but what about Lauren or anyone associated with them?"

"I don't think they're really making any moves on Lauren or Aaron. They're the small fish and we're the sharks, right? But it does mean we have to kill this before it goes too far," Jack replied.

"How did the interview go?" I asked, realizing how much it was starting to get to him. Jack liked to control every situation; he wanted to stay in charge and stay ahead. But with something like this, with all the unknowns, there was no way to know the outcome before it happened.

"Oscar doesn't know anything about the men that tell him to write the letters. He's just a pawn in all of this, but he's something," Jack replied. "But let's not worry about that tonight. You need to take your mind off of what happened, and I have just the thing."

Jack smiled, sliding a hand into his coat pocket and drawing a small bottle of bourbon. He collected two glasses

from the kitchen, pouring me one, and we walked over to the living room.

"I can't believe that you still have all this stuff, and it looks like it never gets used, either," I teased him.

"That's because it doesn't. This place is pretty much where I sleep; the office is my home," Jack laughed.

"You can say that again," seeing it from someone else's perspective made me realize how similar my situation was. My house, as much as I loved it, was little more than a bedroom. I was there maybe ten hours a day, just to eat and sleep before getting back to work.

"But look, you stay here as long as you need to. We're going to get through this, Gwen. I know we are," he said, collapsing into the sofa. I dropped beside him.

"I know we are, Jack. You've never led me astray before, and I know you won't now," I said, placing a soft kiss on his cheek. I don't know why I did it, nor did I expect this to go anywhere else.

It just felt like the right thing to do.

Jack and I spent the rest of the evening on his sofa, watching terrible, old black and white Western movies. We drank whiskey, and he pretended to be a cowboy. If nothing else, it took my mind off the events of the evening, and that's all I wanted.

But I knew tomorrow would be another day, and hopefully, it would be better than today.

Chapter 20

The Witchfinder General

As was my business, I knew the Williamson family's routine as though it were my own. Every morning, Spencer would walk his children to school. Any typical day, they would walk themselves, meeting friends along the way. Now, with the threats from the Order's letters, Spencer took it on himself to make sure they arrived safely.

These morning walks with their father became a habit for the children, a boy named Jackson—after Spencer's adoptive father—and a daughter named Sarah, after no one in particular. Once at school, Spencer took the ten-minute return with great haste, readying himself for work and driving off to his office. There, he'd be busy all morning, going out for lunch with the boys every Thursday, lying to his wife that they were with his boss.

Spencer was a driven man, though work never came before play with him.

Caroline Williamson shared a very different morning routine. A housewife, living her dreams of old, traditional values, spent the morning lazing in bed. Once Spencer returned from dropping the children off at school, she got up, pretended to be busy, but once he left the door, she got back in bed. She lay there most mornings until noon, watching TV and getting lost in the mundanity of her existence.

Lunchtime, she'd often make herself the same sandwich, a humble peanut butter and jelly, eating it outside beside

the pool. She always brought a book with some motivational self-help piece but opted to play on her cellphone instead.

On Tuesdays, she'd spend time with a lover—a Scotsman named Henry Graham. Far too old for Caroline, but he gave her money, and gifts, and trinkets. Much like Spencer's lies of being with his boss, she told him she was out for pilates with the girls.

I found, on more than one occasion, that Caroline would see Henry some evenings. Caroline would make excuses, saying she was going on a girls' night out. Spencer would often stay home and watch pornography on the computer. They rarely spent time together, even when they were both home.

Their lives were in tatters, and I had a front-row seat to the show.

Caroline was in charge of picking the children up from school, around two in the afternoon every day, apart from Wednesdays and Fridays. Their son, Jackson, practised football, and their daughter, Sarah, did choir. On said days, she'd leave the house at a quarter past three.

They lived uninteresting lives, spreading nothing but hatred and lies without ever realizing it. Had they been more in line with the Dench family, better people, perhaps I'd feel more towards their situation. Though I didn't believe I would, not really. My task was to clear the world of these sinners—these monsters, and I'd never stop until the world was pure.

They were the descendants of the devil himself, and soon, they would no longer plague my city.

I waited in my car, dressed mostly in my black outfit all apart from the mask. Today, I opted for a clown. A simple plastic mask with a white face, red bushels of hair coming off the top, and a bright red nose. The cheeks were decorated with splashes of blue and yellow. A wide smile appeared on

the lips. In a few minutes, I knew Caroline and the children would step around the corner. The boy would be gasping for air, having just run laps while the girl would be humming a tune. Caroline would be rolling her eyes, ready to crack open a fresh bottle of sparkling wine the moment she stepped through the door.

As predicted, the children came around the corner first with Caroline not a few steps behind. With her phone in hand, she paid little attention to where the kids ran off to. I supposed she didn't believe the threats coming through her door, nor the potential attacks on her family.

How foolish.

I waited for them to enter the white fence surrounding their land border, with Caroline disappearing into the house. The children went inside, but I knew shortly after, Sarah would step out once more, dressed in some comfortable afterschool clothing.

I knew the kitchen had a full view of the front garden where Sarah played. When she stepped outside with a ribbon in one hand and a dolly in the other, it was time to make my move.

I pulled the clown mask over my face, collected a balloon, and my cane from the back seat, and stepped into the street. Sarah had her back turned to me when I stepped up to the white fence. My step was light, cautious, not to cause any suspicion until I was close enough. When I was, I placed three gentle taps against the wood of the white picket fence with the end of my cane.

Sarah turned around, screeching at the sight of the man wearing a mask.

"Oh no," I said, shaking my head. "Don't scream. I'm just a friendly clown."

I put no effort into a voice, nor did I try and make myself sound more hospitable.

“M-m-momma!” she shouted out. I could see she was ready to turn tail and run.

“Don’t you want a balloon?” I asked, holding the red balloon out.

In hindsight, I realized how foolish it was. With all those Stephen King horror stories about clones with balloons, most children wouldn’t be so eager to rush over to a friendly neighborhood clown. But that’s why I was here—to let the Williamson family know that I was coming.

Sarah shook her head, stunned and stuck in place with me standing before her. From the window, I saw Caroline shuffling through the kitchen.

A few seconds later, Caroline burst through the front door, running up to Sarah, who stood midway between me and her front door. She dropped to her knees, wrapping her hands around her daughter before screaming, “Who the hell are you? What do you want?”

I said nothing.

“I’m calling the police,” she shouted, shuffling into her pants pocket for her phone.

“Caroline Williamson,” I said, releasing the red balloon into the air. I grabbed the silver ball atop my cane with both hands setting it in front of me. “Your time of reckoning is nigh. Your husband, a stain on this earth, will meet the full force of the Order of the Phoenix. His blood is blackened by history, and so are your children.”

Caroline looked up at me, away from her phone that no doubt already had 911 dialed. “You’re not going to get away with this, you sick son of a bitch.”

“You may think so,” I was grinning just as wide as my jester’s mask. “But it’s already far too late for you.”

I spun around on my heels, taking long, drawn-out steps back to my car. Every second step was met with a tap of my cane against the floor.

Caroline Williamson yelled obscenities while Sarah cried out into the empty silence of the afternoon.

Chapter 21

Jack

"Jack, did you hear about what happened to the Williamson family?" Aaron burst into my office. I was so lost in a day-dream that his sudden entry gave me a fright, nearly jumping in my chair.

His shirt was stained with coffee, wrinkled, and he looked exhausted. If anything, I was sure that Aaron put the most hours into this case. I'd leave to go home at night and see him in the office the next morning without a wink of sleep. He'd tell me he was fine, go for a shower, and come straight back.

The determination to the cause was amicable.

"I did. Just got off the phone with Gwen about it," I replied, gesturing that he come in and take a seat. "These bastards are going after the kids now? The problem is, we're stuck in the water without a paddle, and I don't know what's going to happen."

"Something's going to break soon, I can feel it. We made headway with Oscar Carlisle, right? It's small, but it's going to snowball," Aaron replied.

He gave me a smile, a small gesture to reassure me that this was going to work out in the end. But for the first time in my career, I didn't believe it. Everything was stacked against us, and we were falling hard. There's a point of no return, and without anything on the men that were attacking the families, we lose. They were no longer just threats... the Order made a move on Spencer and his family.

It was going to kick off soon, that much I knew.

"I wasn't going to tell you this, but I suppose I should," I let out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Gwen was attacked at her home yesterday by the men. She's not hurt, that's why you saw her around earlier, but the threats are getting more serious to the outsiders, just as much as they are to those involved in the attacks."

"What?" Aaron near-shouted. "What did they—"

"Just scared her. They're trying to set us off here, make us scared. They started with Lauren, and when that failed, they stepped it up to Gwen. Whoever they're going for next, well..."

"It's a good thing I sleep with a gun under my pillow," Aaron chuckled.

"Same," I replied, giving him a half-assed smile.

But I knew deep down they weren't going to target Aaron. If anyone was next, it would be me.

"Let's think about everything we have here, Jack. Sometimes just spitballing ideas is the best way to come to a conclusion on something," Aaron said, leaning back in his chair. "So, we know that these people believe in some ancient bullshit, right? They're chasing down the families because of their lineage that goes all the way back to some witchcraft nonsense hundreds of years ago."

"We have a man in custody that wrote letters for them, trying to scare the families into submission. The Order of the Phoenix is going after both the Williamson and Dench families," I continued his train of thought. But I spent days pondering these things. I knew the ins and outs of everything, even without anyone trying to give me a freshen up on it. There was nothing, these people didn't exist apart from on paper, but the threats were so real.

"They don't even leave fingerprints or hairs at the scene. Even the letters didn't have Oscar's prints on them, and he

doesn't strike me as the kind of man to care about those things," I said, grabbing for my box of Lucky Strikes on the table.

"There can't just be nothing," Aaron replied, I could see the frustration on his face.

"Sometimes, you're just shit out of luck, right? Look at the Zodiac killings, some bad men just get away with it."

"I'm not going to accept that," Aaron spouted. "I'm not going to believe that we've lost this one. There's got to be something we can do..."

Aaron paused as my cellphone began to ring.

"Jack Mercer speaking," I answered.

"I need you to get over here right away," I heard Jane's voice on the other end. "There are people outside my house."

She spoke in hushed tones, but I could hear the fear in her voice.

"I'm on my way," I replied, jumping out of my seat.

"That gun you keep under your pillow at night," I turned to Aaron. "You have that on you now?"

"I do, what's going on?" Aaron jumped to his feet, following me out. He walked over to his table in the main office, grabbing his gun, jacket, and hat.

"I think it's about to go down," I replied. "And we don't have much time to stop it."

Had it been up to me, I'd have never brought Aaron with me. But I knew that I needed backup on this thing, and I didn't know if Gwen would be around for it. In some ways, I knew that Aaron was ready to join me in the field, and that he'd be the perfect partner stopping crime. But even this,

something he's dedicated the past few weeks to, I wasn't sure if he was ready.

Did he have what it took to stand up against those who oppressed him? Could he pull the trigger if it was necessary? He started as a beat cop with the NYPD and rarely saw much other than a few robberies or drug dealings. There was never a life and death situation. Working as a P.I, every interaction was risking your life, never knowing if you'd come out on top.

I didn't want to be the man that brought his career—hell, his life—to an end.

At least I knew he was ready at the drop of a hat.

We rushed through the building to my car and drove at lightning speed to Jane Dench's home. The second we turned onto the freeway, I gave Gwen a call.

"Gwen, I need you down at the Dench home. It looks like we're about to come face to face with the Order," I said.

"I'll be there," she replied.

Now, it was a race against the clock to make sure Jane and her family stayed safe.

Chapter 22

Jack

We arrived at Jane Dench's home, pulling into the driveway. The front door was open and I immediately expected the worst. A group of men coming to her place, hiding in the shadows, what else could I think?

I hoped I wasn't too late, that the family was still safe, but knew how the Order of the Phoenix operated. They were out for blood, and they'd stop at nothing to get it. Their threats, their horrors, all culminated to this point—a family left in tatters.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked Aaron, getting out of the car.

"Ready as I can be," he replied.

Gwen hadn't arrived yet. I didn't expect her to be there before us, not with the distance she had to travel and dropping whatever she was doing at a moment's notice.

Drawing my pistol, I approached the house. Aaron did the same. We moved quickly through the well-maintained garden onto the patio that led inside.

The house was deathly quiet when we entered. A sign of what was to come, I thought, making my way through to the entry foyer.

"Jane?" I called out.

I cleared corners, stepping deeper into the house. Most lights in the house were turned on downstairs with none on upstairs.

"We're in here," Jane shouted.

Relief washed over me that she was still okay. Following her voice, Aaron and I rushed through the living room, towards the dining room.

There was a long sliding door that blocked off our entry into the dining room. It was closed, and I couldn't help but fear whatever waited behind it. Jane Dench was alive though, and if I wanted to make sure she survived, I had to act. Pointing to the wall on the right of the sliding door, Aaron understood my instruction. He pressed his back against it, holding the gun up in the air, ready to take the corner and fire if the need arose.

I took a deep breath, clutching the small brass nob on the door, twisting it back. I half-expected to be met by a bullet just then.

Swinging the door open, I pulled myself into cover on the left side of the door. I didn't peer into the dining room, once more expecting bullets to reign down through it, but they never came. There was only whimpering from the Dench family. Not only Jane and Lance, but the children too.

They huffed and groaned, and the children fought back tears. I swallowed hard, taking the corner gun drawn.

On the far left of the eight-seater dining room table, Lance, Jane, and the children sat. Their hands were out on top of it, palms down. None of them looked restrained or bound in any way. On the far right, at the head of the table, only a single man sat. His head was tilted, and he was dressed in a maroon robe.

A devilish smile clung to his lips.

When we made our way over from the office, I expected the worst. But what I was greeted with was well beyond me. Jane said many people were approaching her home, but to find only one sitting here dumbfounded me.

What the hell was going on? Who the hell were they, and what did they want with this family? At least we had one, and we'd get him into custody soon enough.

"Good evening, detective," the man said.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked, lifting my gun in his direction.

"I am but a humble acolyte of the Witchfinder General. A humble servant to the Lord Almighty," he replied. I could only see his lips moving beneath the hood of his robe. His hands were tucked beneath the table.

"You are under arrest—" I started.

"There's no reason to make these threats, detective," the man cut me off. "I am not here to harm this family, nor am I here to hurt you either. Your time will come, and so will theirs. Patience is a virtue sorely lacked by the modern world."

With his hands under the table, I was hesitant to approach. For all I knew, this could've been some attempt to throw me off guard while he had a gun pointed at one of the Dench's, ready to fire. I wasn't going to take that risk.

"Then what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Please, won't you have a seat?" He rose one hand out from beneath the table and gestured it to an empty chair beside Jane's daughter.

I obliged, still not knowing what waited beneath the table.

"You've been a thorn in our side, detective. Far too long now, have you run rampant and stood against the Order. We have watched and we have seen. The prophet and seer, Oscar Carlisle, is stuck behind your lock and key, but you don't see his vision. You don't see his potential," the man spoke.

“Oscar Carlisle is a sick man that needs help,” I replied.

I set my weapon down, knowing that Aaron had it covered if anything happened. This was my opportunity to get more information on this case, and I wasn’t going to pass it up by being too hostile.

“And what about you, detective?” he asked, tilting his head towards me. “What makes you any different than us?”

“I-I don’t follow,” I replied, cocking a brow.

“Do you not stand to clear the evil from this world? Are you not on the side of good versus evil?”

“I stand to uphold the law, yes,” I replied.

“Then what’s different between us? The Order of the Phoenix believes in fighting for a better future by ridding the world of...” the man paused, turning back towards the Dench family. With a snarl, he finished his sentence, “By ridding the world of scum.”

“These are normal people trying to live their lives in peace, and you are standing in the way of that,” I tried to reason.

“Is it your badge that gives you the delusion that all your actions are justified?” he asked again, his tone back to the oddly sinister voice it was before directly addressing the Dench’s. “What is a badge if not just a title? And what is a title if not created by man? What gives you the right to hold dominion over ordinary people?”

He paused. I opened my mouth to speak, but he rose a single finger in the air to silence me.

“The title of Witchfinder General greatly precedes that of detective. We have stood together for centuries, fighting a holy war against the unknown, and you wish to bring that to a close so soon? Detective Mercer, do you understand how

foolish this all sounds?" the man chuckled, shaking his head.

"And who is the Witchfinder General?" I asked in hopes that this delusional man would let something slip without realizing he did so.

"He is *our* savior," he replied. "He is the word of reason and the sword of God. He will vanquish the evil that resides within this home and return us to a world of purity."

"Why's he not here tonight?"

"Because sacrifices must be made," a low sigh left his lips. "But I cannot be upset about what I must do, for it's the most wonderful honor of all. I must cleanse this house in blood."

"I don't understand," I turned to Aaron, who shrugged his shoulders, never breaking line of sight with the man.

"Soon enough, you will, detective. Soon enough."

Suddenly, the man got up from his chair. His arms were by his side, the long robe stretching out well beyond his hands. All I wanted to know was if he had a weapon, and he never once allowed me to see.

"The unholy sin that dwells in this home will be vanquished at the hands of the almighty," the man spoke. "I will lead you into anew, and with my blood, so too will the light of God shine upon you."

Rolling his shoulders back, the robe dropped to the ground. Getting a good view of him, he was tall, thin, pale, and bald. There were no scars, no bruises, and no tattoos on his skin—it was almost pristine if not transparent from an almost sickly-looking man. His sharp blue eyes carried a weight of sorrow behind them. His gaunt face, a testament to the twisted life he lived.

But, as expected, in his hand, he clutched a knife with an ivory handle. The steel was intricately carved with the pattern of a Phoenix running along the back. The ivory handle was nothing special but pure white.

At the sight of him standing full, the young girl beside me burst out into a terrible screech. A shrill, ear-piercing sound leaving shivers running down my spine.

"Put down the weapon," Aaron shouted, but the man was lost to his own words.

"Look unto me and know thy time has come," he rose both hands into the air. "Look unto me in despair, for your time of reckoning is nigh. The Witchfinder General will bring you to your knees. He will make you cower for mercy."

Aaron approached the lunatic cautiously, extending a hand out to him. "Drop the weapon. You are under arrest."

"And you, Detective Jack Mercer, will fall from on high," he pressed the edge of the knife against his throat. "With my blood, I cleanse this home of evil. And by the hand of the Witchfinder, so too will you be vanquished."

Aaron lunged forward, intending to grab the man, but he drew the blade across his throat. Launching out of my chair, I rushed to his side. His blood spilled across the white carpet floor beneath the table as he struggled on.

At that moment, I saw his fear. How this decision played out differently in his mind to the reality of his situation. He sacrificed himself for nothing, and now, only in dying did he realize this to be true.

Jane grabbed her son, averting his eyes, while Lance did the same with their daughter. They screamed and cried, with the image of what just happened burning into their minds. I looked at them and then the body on the floor.

Without warning, I puked uncontrollably.

What the hell was going on here?

Chapter 23

Gwen

I arrived at Jane Dench's home, a little after 20 minutes from Jack's call, but what I walked into could only be described as a nightmare. The sound of the children screaming, Jane whimpering, and Aaron trying to console Jack shot terror through my core.

Did something happen to him? The thought ran through my mind. It was always a possibility in this line of work. But no matter how dangerous a situation got, I always saw Jack Mercer coming out on top. So, standing in the foyer beside the staircase, my mind spiraled to all the darkest depths.

"Jack?" I shouted out, into the house.

Following the screaming children, I managed to track them through the house and into the dining room. Both parents clutched their children, turning them away from some horrific scene.

I saw the blood before I saw Jack. The white stained carpet, the body beside him, and my heartbeat at a thousand miles a second.

"Jack, are you okay? Are you hurt?" I rushed over, holstering my weapon. Aaron was hunched at the side of him, which only made things worse.

"He's okay," Aaron said, facing me. "It's just been one hell of a night."

I wrapped my arms around Jack, who was near weeping at the sight of the man before him. Though no tears ran down his face, I could see it in his eyes how desperately he was

hurting from whatever happened here. As soon as Jack saw me, he got up from where he was kneeling over.

"I think I failed," he said, looking over to the family. "I don't think I can beat this one."

Jack started walking off into the living room. I followed behind him.

"It's not over yet," I replied.

"But what more is there?" Jack stumbled, falling against a wall as he made his way to the front door. "What good of a detective am I if I can't help these people? But how can I help them if I don't have anything to go on?"

He continued on with a long list of questions about his failures.

"Jack," I said, rushing up behind him and stopping him by wrapping my arms around his waist. "You haven't failed these people. You're fighting tooth and nail to protect them. And that's just the way, isn't it? The hardest fights always end in the sweetest victories."

He turned to me but didn't speak.

"Let me take you home," I said, sliding my hand into his.

"Aaron needs a lift back to his place," Jack said, a cough accompanying. His thousand-yard stare never breaking. "I think I need to be alone."

Jack left the Dench home, getting in his car and driving off. I watched for a while as the Dodge Charger drove down the street before making the preparations to remove the body from the house.

The Dench family took their children away from the scene. It pained me to know that those children would forever bear the burden of what they saw there that night. Aaron filled me in with the details of what happened, and to some degree, I understood Jack's suffering.

They were so close to achieving their goal, and we had no way of stopping them.

But I always saw the brighter side to things, even when they seemed the darkest. And in that vision of purity, I knew Jack Mercer would save the day. He always had a way of clicking when it got right down to it. These moments of self-pity and self-loathing came often.

It was easy to feel defeated and broken, but this wasn't over yet. As long as Jane and Spencer still drew breath, Jack wouldn't give up on them. Only, that night, he did. For a brief while, he'd feel like a failure, only to rise from the ashes to conquer his battles. I believed in him, even if he didn't believe in himself—and so did the rest of his crew.

Chapter 24

Jack

I drank until my face went fuzzy and my vision went blurry. That night, there was no stopping the liquor from pouring down my throat. I'd faced troubles in the past, dark cases that seemingly had no end in sight, but never once did I believe I was bested. Maybe it was a sign of my age, or perhaps it had something to do with the fact that criminals were just getting too smart.

It was men like Aaron Hart who found a position in this life over men like me. Those who knew how computers worked, those who could solve a case from a mobile phone rather than out in the field. I never wanted that for myself. I prided myself on being an old-school detective, a man that knew how to use a gun and get a job done.

But I was an old dog, and new tricks didn't work well with me.

And so, I tried finding an answer at the bottom of a bottle. When I eventually drank too much, I got into bed. The actual events of that night are nothing but a blur.

But what that evening led to was the most problematic solution I've ever achieved.

~

"Wakey-wakey, Jacky-baby," a voice came, followed by a tapping on my forehead, just above the bridge of my nose.

The sensation pulled me from the gentle sleep, with only a heavy head and immense confusion surrounding me. I was greeted by three men standing in front of me, each one

dressed in a similar maroon robe as the man in Jane Dench's house.

These three, however, held weapons of various sorts. From what I could tell, no guns. One had a baseball bat, the other a sword, and the final a rebar pole.

"We're going to introduce you to a world of pain," one said with a gleeful giggle.

I looked at them while my mind kicked to life, and realizing the threat, a terrible, deep scream escaped my lips. I reached for the revolver I kept under my pillow, and without much hesitation, aimed and fired. The man closest to me, the one I struck, collapsed to the ground.

I continued shooting, though my aim off from the heavy-headed hangover. I heard another tumble to the ground.

"He shot me, man," I heard him say.

"You're on your own," the third shouted, and not long after, I heard my door slam.

At this point, I was on my feet, replacing the six rounds of my revolver and approaching the door quietly. I managed to get the first attacker right between the eyes in my state of confusion and panic. He lay motionless at the side of my bed, with the sword still gripped between his palm.

"No, don't do this," the second man called. I heard him pulling himself along my fake wood floor, through the hallway towards the kitchen.

Peering out, I saw the trail of blood—the man who just managed to take the corner doing his best to escape. I trailed where he might have been with the barrel of the gun until I reached the island of my kitchen.

From there, I saw him on the ground. He managed to crawl his way towards the door, reaching for the handle with

hopes of getting out. The baseball bat he held lying somewhere behind me now.

“Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my house?” I asked, the gun forever trained on his midsection.

“I’m just doing a job, man. Please don’t kill me,” his voice was shrill. I could tell he was younger just by the way he spoke.

I made my way towards the short corridor that led from my door into the kitchen and living room.

“Who sent you?” I asked. From there, I saw the wound—a shot on the upper thigh, shredding meat from bone. I walked over to him, grabbing him by the injured leg and pulling him back into the living room.

He shouted in agony as his body was forced back. He tried grabbing the leg, which no doubt shot terrible pain through his entire body.

With the night I just endured, I wasn’t going to mess around.

“Some freak who calls himself the Witchfinder General,” he replied.

Getting him into the living room, he spun around, exposing his face from beneath the maroon hood. He wasn’t a kid, but he wasn’t a man either. Barely had hair on his chin, yet he found himself looking for trouble in my house. I was perplexed and frustrated by it, all at once.

“What does he want with me?” I questioned, grabbing the front of his robe and pulling him up. I leaned him against the coffee table, and collapsed into my sofa. Knowing they weren’t boys made this a little easier.

“He just wanted us to rough you up a bit. We’ve been running with him the last while. He pays good, but he’s a bit nuts,” he said.

“What’s your name, boy?” I cracked my neck from side to side.

“Granger.”

“What the hell kind of name is Granger?” I leaned in close to him, making sure he stared deep into my eyes.

He didn’t answer, realizing the rhetoric behind the question.

“You know what your piece of shit boss has been getting up to lately? The hell he’s putting people through?” I continued my questioning.

“We’re just hired muscle, man. We don’t get involved in his business,” Granger replied, shaking his head. “Please don’t kill me.”

“I’m not going to kill you, boy. But what I am going to do is make it hurt, real bad if you don’t start giving me answers,” I pressed a finger into his chest.

“Who is the Witchfinder General?”

“I don’t know his name, man. He’s always wearing this mask, ever since we met him,” he shook his head.

“Why are you helping a man that’s threatening innocent lives?”

“It’s all for shits and giggles, man. He’s not going to do anything to these people,” Granger sniffed, trying to smile.

“Wrong answer,” I grabbed him by the leg, squeezing as hard as I could.

Granger clutched my hand, screaming out. He held as long as he could but eventually spoke through the screeching. “He said these were bad people, and we were doing good. We didn’t care because we wanted his money, okay? We weren’t ever gonna help him hurt nobody.”

“How can I believe that, knowing why you’re in my house?” My grip never left Granger’s leg. I heard the sound of approaching sirens out in the distance of the night. One of my neighbors probably called at the sound of the gunshot.

Granger couldn’t speak through the shouting.

“We’re running out of time, so let’s get the shot going, huh?” I said, lifting the gun back to Granger.

Knowing that the cops would be outside my door soon, I had to sort this out before they arrived. I pressed the barrel of the gun into his mouth, holding it there before speaking. He knew I wasn’t afraid to use it, with the man dead in my room, so I had to bank that he’d bite.

“You’re going to tell me right now, where do you meet with the Witchfinder General? You thought you’d get a couple of cheeky shots on me? Well, how the tables have turned.”

Granger started weeping, and the faint odor of urine struck my nose.

He was scared, and he knew this was his last chance.

“We met in a shitty little bar outside the city called the Salty Oyster. He’s there most nights, trying to find new people to join his cult,” Granger started weeping. Like a newborn baby, he was just about ready to beg for his mother.

But just like that, I had something. After weeks of absolute and unending torture, there was somewhere to go. And though it was only the beginning, at least it was the beginning of the end.

Chapter 25

Jack

"I heard about what happened to you last night," Aaron said as I stepped into the office. "How are you holding up with everything that happened?"

"I don't really remember it," I replied.

That wasn't a lie either, as I often told when I was asked questions like that. I never wanted to worry the crew about my state of mind or how I was holding up on a situation. As strong as they were, I knew that they weren't always ready for the hard truths, and I didn't want to be the reason any of them suffered.

"But now that it's all over, we've got something," I said, wanting to bring the spirits in the room up.

Aaron no doubt told Lauren how rough I took the previous night's events at Jane Dench's home. Lauren was nothing but compassionate, and I could see it on her face. She was gracious and caring, a great empath, and seeing her friends suffer often broke her. I didn't want to be another reason for her to hurt.

"What do you mean we've got something?" Aaron asked, turning to face me. He had a pen sticking out of his mouth, chewing on the end.

"The kid that came into my house, scared shitless, told me about a hideout for the man we're looking for. There was no name, but there's enough to go by. And if we act fast enough, and with just the right amount of luck, we might be able to get away with this before anyone gets hurt," I replied. "Where's Gwen, anyway?"

I got so accustomed to Gwen being around the office that I could've believed she somehow became a part of my team again. I had to admit, it was good having her around too. Another bright, smiling face, ready to stop at nothing to fight crime and kick ass.

But not seeing her there that day made me realize that this was just a one-case deal. That when it was all over, she was going to head out again, into the big, bad world. I hated the idea of that. Having her around was the cherry atop the ice cream sundae. I'd thought about the offer since the day she stepped into my office all those weeks ago, asking for help.

And the more I thought about it, the more I wanted it to be so. But would she want to join me and the Mercer Detective Agency? The choice, as always, was up to her.

"No idea, boss. She hasn't come in yet," Aaron said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Send her to my office as soon as she gets in, alright? We've all got a lot to talk about, getting ready for whatever might go down."

With a nod, Aaron spun around, getting back to work. Throwing my coat and hat over the rack, I walked across to my office. Lauren followed close behind, shutting the door behind us. By the look in her eyes, I could tell she was about to say something I didn't want to hear, but I'd let her do it.

She wanted peace of mind, just as badly as I wanted to end this thing.

"How are you feeling?" she walked over to a chair opposite me and took a seat.

"I'm feeling good," I replied.

"Aaron told me what happened last night, Jack. How beaten up you were about what happened to that guy. It's

not like you to throw the hat in—”

“I never threw the hat in. Sometimes it feels like the world is ending around you, but when you take a step back and realize that everything’s going to be okay, things come out okay in the end.”

“But at what cost? You’re killing yourself over these cases, pouring every part of yourself into them, and for what? It’s going to be the death of you.”

There was no threat of tears, not like usual when we had these conversations. Lauren’s stern expression was somewhat unsettling. I knew how she was; I knew how she typically acted.

“What are you saying?” I inquired, cocking a brow.

“I don’t know,” she shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “I just want to know that you’re okay. You’re a good man, Jack, and I don’t want to see the world lose a good man because he throws himself into his work head-on. I guess I’m just looking out for you, like you’ve always looked out for us.”

“This is a big break, Lauren,” I tried easing her mind. “This might even be our final push to put down a case that’s been sitting for over three decades. Whoever the Order of the Phoenix is, whatever evil they want to bring on this world, we’re going to end it.”

Lauren nodded, pulling herself out of the chair. “I trust you, Jack. I know I always can. As long as you’re standing up and fighting the good fight, there’s nothing I’d rather see.”

I let her walk out. I knew she just wanted the best for me, and I wanted the same for all of them. But the only way to make sure that happened was by ridding the world of the scum that dwelled in it.

~

Gwen arrived a few hours later, while I was in the midst of researching the Salty Oyster. It was designed with hoodlums and criminals in mind—men and women who did gun-for-hire work or drug trafficking. The place seemed fitting for a man like the Witchfinder General, someone looking to build an army of monsters who cared about nothing but coin.

After the usual questions of how I was feeling after the night before, and my attempts to let everyone know that I really was fine, we all stepped into my office. The two ladies sat in front of me while Aaron hovered behind them, resting on his haunches.

“So, what are we looking at here?” Gwen asked, crossing her arms.

“From what I can find, the Salty Oyster is known for its rather shady clientele. Bad men with bad intentions, looking to make a quick buck any way they can,” I started. “We know that the Witchfinder General’s looking for these exact people to cause a little havoc around the world. With his current crew, the same ones that came to your place, I think, out of commission, he’ll be on the hunt again.”

“What about the one at the Dench family’s house?” Gwen asked. “It doesn’t add up, Jack. There were four that came to my place and only three at yours. And if these were just some thugs, why did a man kill himself for this bullshit cause?”

“I thought about that after those hooligans came to my house. Three guns for hire, while one was far more inclined to believe the nonsense that the Witchfinder spoke. We’re also thinking about men like Oscar Carlisle, right? Deluded people that don’t know what to do but listen to the voice of power. I believe he’s used them to further his twisted

agenda, while the others aren't part of his actual crew," I replied.

There was no proof behind my estimations of the situation, but it seemed logical enough. Why would the Witchfinder hang out around some shady bar if he had all the men he needed? People that wanted, or more often required, money would be more inclined to join him.

"That's as good a reason as any to go by, I guess," Aaron said, eyeing my screen. "What's our plan of action then?"

I looked over at Lauren, who almost looked disappointed in the whole situation. There was a smile on her face, no doubt because I was out of my slump, but her eyes betrayed her sadness.

"We're going to go there and deal with this once and for all. Before he gets the chance to attack the Dench's or the Williamson's. For too long now, this piece of work has been reigning terror onto the people of New York, good people that have no say in the matter because they're backed into a corner. From my understanding, he always keeps his mask on even when he's at the Salty Oyster. It shouldn't be hard to pick him out," I replied.

I found that many times, attacking head-on was the best play. Making plans and acting in the shadows was for scared people. Taking the bull by the horns and conquering was the only way I believed in working.

"And what if tonight's the night he makes a move on one of the families? And we're all the way out of the city, too far to get to them?" Gwen asked.

"If you're worried, maybe you and Aaron should hang back and take care of any threats that happen around town," I reached for my box of Lucky Strikes, lighting one up.

"There's no way I'm letting you walk into the lion's den without any help," Aaron shook his head. "That's a death

sentence, and you know it.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. But look, that’s not my call. I’d rather have you here anyway, staying safe. We’ve seen too much, and I don’t think I can deal with any of you getting hurt.”

“And what about you, Jack? What if you get hurt?” Lauren asked.

“That’s a risk I’ve always been willing to take, and I’ll keep taking it,” I cut it off. I knew it came from a good place, but I wasn’t going to stand for these monsters getting away with murder.

“Look, how about you and Aaron go down to the Salty Oyster while I stay in town? I’ll hold down the fort over here. If anything happens, at least I can give you guys a call,” Gwen said, instantly noticing the tension between Lauren and me, deciding to get back to the important topic at hand.

“I’m down with it if you are,” Aaron replied, gesturing to me with a hand. Though he’d be happy to follow the instruction, he’d want to make sure I was on board with it first.

“Then it’s settled. Aaron and I will go out, while you stay down here. And we’ll keep going until this is over.”

Chapter 26

The Witchfinder General

I saw you there, Detective Mercer, entering my place of business. The way you held your calm, relaxed, collected attitude when standing amid criminals. Of course, your safety lay within your anonymity. These men had no idea who you were, nor do they care for your existence.

They're here, looking for work.

But are you so different than me? It was only the night before that you shot a man down in your home. Your badge protected you, saved you from the cold stone walls of a prison cell. What would've happened to anyone else in your position?

Now, you're here, in my domain, stalking through the crowd. But you didn't know it then, did you? That you were too late, and soon enough, the *families*, the monsters you wished to protect, were about to die? While you stay on this end of the world, trying to find me, I'd be doing exactly what you sought to stop.

A gleeful giggle escaped me.

Drawing my phone from my pocket, I made a call. It rang once before the voice came on the other end. "Hey, boss, what's going on?"

"Meet me at the Williamson home, no later than an hour," I replied.

"You want us to bring guns this time? We don't want a rehash of what happened to Granger and the boys," he said.

I contemplated his question. The Order of the Phoenix, through its illustrious career, never used guns, but I supposed that wasn't the worst idea. These thugs weren't there to purify the world, they were there to defend me while I completed the Lord's work.

"Yes, bring guns," I said with a sigh. "But it all ends tonight, boys. There's no need to worry."

~

The lights were off in Spencer Williamson's home when I arrived. I saw my crew's black van outside, a few houses down as I drove up. Knowing their roles, they were no doubt scoping out the house by the time I arrived, waiting in the shadows and preparing to breach. Pulling my mask out from the backseat, collecting my cane, I made my way towards the abode.

Slow, drawn-out steps from the street, by the white picket fence and to the front door. With every step I took, one by one, my team emerged behind me. There were five of us once more. More than anything else, it was an annoyance that Granger and his band of misfits failed their task on the detective. A savage beating was all I asked them to deliver, and their failure ensured that he came back with a vengeance.

If this was to end, it had to be tonight. They were getting too close, and I had an objective to accomplish.

The front door was locked, which was expected, but I had a key cut when I first found out that Spencer was linked to the Crossley family. Long before I made any signs of a threat, I made sure to follow them, know them, and have every detail of their lives mapped. I acted just as my father before me, hunting the Crossley's. Our long-standing family tradition, ridding the world of sin, would never end.

Not until every last offspring of the devil himself was stripped from this world.

"Everyone's good on what they have to do, right?" I asked.

"Sure are," Andrew Thomas replied. He held a sawn-off shotgun in his hand, resting it atop his shoulder.

Back in the Order's prime, we had no need to hire thugs. When my father held the position of Witchfinder General, there was an overflow of like-minded people standing against tyranny. But not a generation later, only despair grew among our ranks. I was the last remaining son of a man who dedicated his life to freedom and peace for all, and I'd never let Detective Jack Mercer get in the way of that.

"Andrew, I'd like you to come with me while the rest of you go off and find the children. Bring them all to the living room," I said. "Once they're all bound, I'd like you to leave and make your way out to Jane Dench. I'll finish business here and meet you once I'm done."

"Got it, boss," came the murmurs of the crew.

We entered the Williamson home, not bothering to search the house. We made our way straight upstairs. The crew scattered once we got upstairs, either making their way to the children's rooms or clearing bathrooms while they walked. Andrew and I made our way to the master bedroom. He kept his gun in his hands, hidden beneath the length of the extended robe that ran down his arms.

I walked without a car, tapping my cane against the ground with every step.

They never woke up, not while we ascended the staircase, nor when we opened the door. Spencer Williamson and his wife, Caroline, snored peacefully, even through the sound of the TV that remained on.

“Spencer,” I called, tapping him on the forehead with the bottom of my cane. “Spencer, it’s time to wake up.”

He shot up at the rude awakening. I couldn’t see his eyes, but both he and Caroline burst out into a terrible screech the moment Andrew flicked on the light.

“I’d advise you against screaming,” Andrew said, showing them the double barrel in his hands. Both Caroline and Spencer stopped, now only cowering. From down the hall, the children were soon to follow in their bellowing before the crew silenced them.

“Wh-who are you?” Spencer asked, making some distance between us and huddling against the wall.

“They call me the Witchfinder General, and I’m here to rid the world of your sin,” I replied.

“On your feet,” Andrew said, gesturing with the barrel of the shotgun that they get up and off the bed. Neither Spencer nor Caroline disobeyed his orders.

“Look, man, you’ve got the wrong people,” Spencer said in protest.

“Our children,” Caroline said, turning to the door. Without a second thought, she started darting towards Andrew but didn’t make it far before he struck her with the butt of his shotgun.

“Your kids are in excellent care,” I said.

Andrew, without needing orders, collected a zip tie from his pocket and bound Caroline’s hands. Then, with a roll of ducttape, he shut her mouth. Blood poured from her nose, and she looked faint, but he pulled Caroline to her feet, propping her up against the wall.

“Why are you doing this?” Spencer shouted, tears streaming down his face. He was a blubbering mess.

“Because you are the spawn of a most vile evil,” I replied.

Andrew approached, tying up Spencer's hands and shutting his mouth in a similar way to Caroline.

From there, he led them down the staircase, shotgun in hand, ensuring their obedience. By the time we got downstairs, the living room light was on and the children were strapped up all the same as their parents.

"You sure you don't need us for anything else?" Andrew asked, setting Spencer and Caroline down on the long sofa beside their children.

"No, you can go. It's best you keep an eye on Jane Dench."

Andrew and his crew believed I was here for a long-standing debt rather than my true intentions. I didn't think their attitudes would remain the same regarding the situation if they knew my true intentions. But with the family bound and gagged, I didn't see a need for them there anyway.

Andrew's crew would only hinder my rituals, cleansing the world of sin.

I waited for them to leave the house and disembark in their black van before continuing. Once they were gone, I set out to accomplish my goal.

"It's a tremendous shame and a bout of unluck that we find ourselves in this position, Mr. Crossley. You could not choose the world you were born into, nor could your children."

Spencer wriggled in his chair, looking over at his wife and children, shaking his head. His eyes pleaded with me, begging for their release. But I couldn't do that. Unlike my father and those who came before, I wasn't soft. This line died tonight, never to bear offspring again. The innocence of children only lasted so long, I knew.

And though I may have had to pay the ultimate price for serving their lives up in honor of my God, so be it.

I drew my ceremonial dagger from beneath my robe. It was simple in design yet elegant. The pommel resembled the white ivory mask I wore that evening. Beneath it, a short, glass tube waited empty. Finally, the blade, a thin, a short piece of metal designed to funnel blood from the victim into the glass tube, ensuring a cleansing of the blood.

“I’d hate to have your family watch you suffer, Spencer,” I sighed, taking short steps towards the youngest of his children, Sarah.

I could hear his begging from behind the duct tape covering his mouth. I ignored it.

The girl was screaming, and her panic only intensified as I pulled her out of the chair. I kneeled before her, shaking my head. “There’s no need for tears, child. It’s over now.”

Her parents’ protests came, Caroline dropping out of her chair to beg further. But it was too late. I was on the brink of destroying yet another witch bloodline. And nothing would stop me from completing my task—not now.

I pressed the tip of the blade against Sarah’s neck, and with a single flick, blood started to pour. At first, I held it there, allowing drops to sink into the glass tube before releasing her. She collapsed to the ground.

Spencer, from his position behind, managed to get to his feet and charge at me in this time. With a heavy shoulder, he slammed into me. His lightweight body collapsed atop me, and with every ounce of strength he had left, he forced his head up and down against my own.

I felt blow after blow, which connected to my face, nose, and forehead. I saw stars, felt as though I might pass out, and for a second, had the thrill of my life. How foolish of me not to tie his feet, I thought.

But with control of my hands, I managed to break free from him reasonably easily.

“You think this is a game, do you?” I shouted.

Spencer couldn't get to his feet with his hands tied, and I delivered three strong kicks to his head and face. Each one harder than the last until he stopped squirming on the ground. Was he dead? I didn't know. I collected my knife from where it fell not an arm's length away and wedged it into his chest. He kicked to life once more as the blade delivered the final blow to his heart.

I said nothing else to Caroline and Jackson, ending them the same as Sarah.

Now, it was on to the Dench household.

Chapter 27

Jack

The Salty Oyster was a dump. From the dirty floors that were sticky from booze that sat too long to the crusty people that had mean looks in their eyes. It was a big building with corrugated steel roofing and walls covered in posters and pictures. It stood with two floors, the first being where angry folk would drink their cheap booze and pray for a better tomorrow, while the second had a dance floor.

Tables, overcrowded with bad people, spoke their twisted business of drug trafficking and murder. Guns were drawn at the drop of a hat, and fists were thrown with little provocation. The Salty Oyster was a world of its own, with bad people looking for easy money.

I felt disgusted from the second I set foot in the building, all the way until Aaron and I stepped out.

I was no stranger to seedy bars and devious people. In my youth, I spent a good few years in these places, learning the enemy and how they operated. Coming back to one now, though, made me sick.

With every step I took, I felt like there was a target on my back. That one of these scumballs would recognize me as the cop that put their partner away. The feeling never faded, not for a second. I stayed on high alert, and I could see that Aaron followed the same path. Hands ready to draw our weapons and fight our way out of the front door if the need arose.

That was one thing I could commend Aaron for, at least. He was ready and willing to die for the good fight. Too many

people liked the title or held down the role of a police officer, only to cower at the first sign of danger. But Aaron wasn't a police officer, not by heart.

He was like me in some ways, a vigilante that wanted to see the world turn into a better place. Keeping him behind a desk, for his own safety and my peace of mind, never showed that side. But having him out in the field as a partner taught me to respect the kid.

"Excuse me," I gestured over to a barwoman, who hurried over to Aaron and me.

"Yes, sorry for keeping you waiting," she said. "You can see how busy the place is."

"No bother," I replied, giving her a smile. I lit a cigarette while speaking with her. "I've actually got a few questions I wanted to ask you."

"Look, sir, I ain't here to go home with you tonight. I'm just doing my job," she groaned. There were many drunk and rowdy men here—I wasn't surprised that she elicited many such reactions.

"I'm not here to take you home. Not that you're not lovely, but I'm a detective working an active case. I was hoping you'd be able to answer a few questions for me," I replied. If anything, I had to think the bartenders wouldn't have any ties with the criminals here.

"Huh," she nodded her head. "Takes a lot of balls for a cop to walk into this place."

"Well, I'm not a cop. I'm a private investigator," I replied. "Look, I don't really care what goes on in here or what these fine people are doing. I'm looking for a man... wears a mask most of the time."

"Lots of people wear masks in here. Keeping their identity hidden is a pretty key part to their... line of work," she

replied.

"It's ivory, old-looking," I said. An instant glint in her eye let me know that she knew who I was talking about.

"You talking about that freak that calls himself the Witch Hunter Sergeant or some shit?" she replied.

"That's the man I'm looking for, yes."

"Well, yeah, I've obviously seen him around. Comes in here looking for guys mostly. They're usually the big kind or thieving kind. I know a couple of 'em, but I don't know nothing about that Witchy guy," she said.

"Okay, and is he here tonight?"

The barwoman scanned the crowd, looking both up and down the staircase. Shaking her head, I knew it was a dead end.

"I don't think I've ever seen him without that mask on, so I couldn't tell you if he is or isn't," she replied. "I'm sorry I can't help much."

"No, no, thank you for your time," I said.

Aaron and I spent another good few hours in the Salty Oyster. I drank water instead of beer, focusing on the people that entered and exited. There was no point in trying to hide any suspicious activity. If I managed to find him there, everything went back to normal, and I'd have concluded another harrowing case.

But as time went on and the bar started to empty, I knew we were out of luck, and so did Aaron.

"I don't think he's coming tonight," Aaron said, eyeing the crowd around the bar.

"Yup," I sighed, looking around the room one last time. We were reaching midnight. If we didn't see him then, I

didn't think the Witchfinder General would appear anytime after.

But I didn't feel deflated. This was a slow burn, and we'd come back the next night and every night after that until we eventually found him. If this was his hangout, as Granger said, then he'd be here eventually. Of that, I had to be hopeful.

However, I'd soon find out that hope wasn't enough.

"Let's get out of here. We can try again tomorrow," I threw a handful of dollar notes on the table, getting out of my chair. I half expected to be jumped on my way out, but the second we broke the smoke-filled Salty Oyster, drawing fresh air into our lungs, I felt relieved.

New York was a 45-minute drive from the Oyster. We got on the road within seconds, taking the turn on the highway and driving into the night.

"You think he's ever going to show? He knows who we are, right? What if the Witchfinder's got tabs on us at all times?" Aaron asked, about halfway back to the city.

The thought never crossed my mind.

"You think he was in there the whole time?" I groaned.

"I do. Thought about it while we were sitting at the bar. He could've been there, watching us, and we wouldn't have ever known," Aaron sounded despondent. Who could blame him?

"Well, then he knows we're on his trail, and it's only a matter of time until we catch him," I said, feeling a shot of pride burst through my core.

"And what if this is what sets him off?" Aaron replied.

Just as he said those words, my phone began to ring. Through the Bluetooth system installed in my car, I answered it with a click of a button on the steering wheel. A

small screen on the center console of the vehicle showed the caller was Gwen Sullivan.

Who would've guessed Aaron, indirectly, was the bearer of bad news?

"Jack, you've got to get down to Jane's place. They finally made their move," I could hear the panic in her voice. The words left her lips at such an incredible pace that I barely managed to catch her say I needed to get to the Dench residence.

"Gwen, breathe," I said. "Tell me what's going on?"

"He killed Spencer," she said. "And I think he's going after Jane."

I cursed under my breath, spinning the car around dangerously before flying off in the direction of Jane's house.

"I'll meet you there," I said, cutting the call.

With the way I was driving, I couldn't have the distraction of a phone call. Even Aaron realized not to bother as I swerved recklessly through what little traffic there was at this time of night. I flicked on the lights in front of my car, turning on a siren I had no business having, and rushed to save Jane Dench.

~

After their hellish night with the gaunt man who killed himself in her home, Jane Dench and her family were told to stay at a motel in the city. The place wasn't unique in any way, just a place for her to stay safe while the investigation continued. To my understanding, there was a police cruiser outside all through the day and night. The Dench family were given instructions not to leave.

We skidded the parking lot where Jane currently resided, arriving first. Knowing Gwen, she no doubt had police

backup on the way. It was eerily quiet in the parking lot, apart from a few vehicles from patrons of the motel. The police cruiser sat at the end of the parking lot, and from my position, I could see two men sitting inside.

A sigh of relief washed over me at the sight of the car. If the Witchfinder managed to get here after his business with Spencer, he wouldn't be able to get through the cops.

"You think they're here?" Aaron asked, making the same observation as me. "Or are they going to wait before the next attack?"

"I don't know," I replied, getting out of the car. Aaron followed, listening while I spoke. "If I had to hazard a guess, the Witchfinder's going to try and do everything in his power to stop it before we catch up to him. If he's not here yet, he's going to come tonight, and at least we're here to help out now."

I took long, hurried steps from my spot towards the police cruiser. It was as good a guess as any to think he'd still come by tonight.

"You think he'd have the balls to come out when he knows there's police protection on the family?" Aaron questioned.

"I don't think anything could stop him at this point," I replied.

We got to the police cruiser, and I walked around. I half hoped the officers might notice me approaching and get out to speak, rather than me having to knock on their window. But something about it felt off as I approached the driver's side. From the second I saw them, up until now, they were motionless.

I presumed they might've taken a nap, but any cop worth their salt would've done it in turns. One, then the other, always having a watchful eye on their surroundings.

Tapping the window gave me no reaction either. Drawing my phone, I clicked on the flashlight and shone it onto the officers.

As the light shone over the officers, I saw it. Both of them took a single bullet to the head, and they were sitting still because they'd been shot. The passenger side window was rolled down—no doubt where the bullets came from.

The driver held the radio in his hand, most likely attempting to call for backup as the first bullet was fired. I drew my pistol and ran towards the staircase leading up to the second floor of the motel. Aaron chased behind, not questioning my actions.

A smarter man would've waited for backup, but I never claimed to be a smart man.

Running up the staircase, two steps at a time, I made my way over to Jane's room. Having gotten confirmation on it that morning from the police officers that booked her into the motel, I was ready for whatever waited within.

Aaron and I approached the door, but I could hear the muffled voices from within as we neared.

"That's all of them, right?" a voice asked. I could hear the muffled screams of Jane and her children.

"It is," a second voice said. "Thank you for your service, gentlemen. Payment will be processed in the morning."

I assumed that the second man speaking was our target, the Witchfinder General. He let out gleeful laughter, maniacal and monstrous. "Oh, how much fun we're going to have, Marilyn."

She tried screaming out again through whatever kept her mouth shut. It made me feel sick thinking about what was going to happen to them if I didn't get in there on time. But I

was here now, and that was the first step to getting them out safely.

“Right, we’re out of here before this shit gets too weird,” the first man that spoke said again.

I gestured to Aaron that he pin himself on the other side of the door. My breathing hastened at the sound of the footsteps approaching the door. I tried working out if there were three or four, a big distinction, but with everyone walking at once, all the footsteps blended together.

The Witchfinder didn’t speak, no doubt waiting for his entourage to leave. The doorknob jostled, and as it did, I brought the gun up to my chest. This was it, now. Do or die time. I knew these people didn’t care about killing cops, which made me far more nervous about the outcome.

“That guy’s nuts, man. Why the hell did we even help him out?” a voice asked as the door swung open.

“Sometimes you do what you gotta do to make money, my man. You like that car you drive? That house you live in?”

Before another reply came, I took the corner, gun out, pressing against the lead man’s chest.

“Hands up where I can see them,” I shouted. The man looked me in the eye, nodding his head.

“That’s a bad idea,” he said, lifting his hands, and so did the one behind him.

I pushed into the house, forcing them all backward, deeper into the wide-open living room of the motel. Aaron followed close behind, gun pointed in towards the men all the same.

They all wore the same maroon robe as the man that entered the Dench home. Only, these four didn’t wear the hood over their heads.

And there they were, the Dench family—only the daughter was missing, and so was the Witchfinder General. Jane looked at me, and I could see the fear and panic in her eyes. Her head twisted towards a closed door on one end of the room. I knew that's where her daughter was taken.

I felt my heart racing. If that twisted bastard touched a hair on that girl's head, I'd have torn him to pieces with my bare hands. But there was a more prominent threat.

Though the frontman held his hands up, and so did the second, two of them didn't.

"You really thought you'd just walk in here and save the day?" he asked, chuckling.

"You know what you're doing here?" I replied.

"I don't really care," the man said, turning to face the men behind him. "The way I see it, there's two of you and for of us. You really think those odds are in your favor?"

"Make that three of us," I heard Gwen say from behind, stepping into the apartment. In her hands, a pump-action shotgun. "You two, hands up—"

Before she could finish her sentence, a bald man behind lifted his hand. Without a second's hesitation, Aaron fired a single bullet in his direction. The bald man collapsed to the ground, and in his fist, a snub nose revolver. The third man dropped his gun and lifted his hands with no need to tell him again.

"Can you two handle this?" I asked, knowing I had to get into the back room and stop the Witchfinder from completing whatever sick plan he had for that poor girl.

"We've got you covered," Aaron said. His voice was shaky, and so was the hand holding his pistol.

"Now, either of you boys make any sudden movements, I'll put a bullet in you all the same," Gwen said, cocking the

shotgun.

But my trust was well placed, and as I pushed by the small group of thugs, a small force of police officers moved into the building. They yelled orders, telling the thugs to get down, and started their arresting process.

I burst through the bedroom door, pistol drawn, and fixed it on the mass, sitting on the bed. There I saw him, the Witchfinder General, the man I'd been hunting for weeks now, with the Dench girl on his lap.

I never learned her name and now regretted making the decision. It wasn't in my nature to get too attached to the family. Jane was my client, and I promised to help her. Learning more of her family, though they were a high priority, brought emotions to a case.

Whenever possible, I avoided working on emotions. I knew how dangerous they were to a case and their impact on getting a job done. But seeing her on the Witchfinder's lap, tears spilling from her face as she attempted shouting through the duct tape covering her mouth, I wanted to console her. An innocent child, no matter what happened there that night, would never forget these heinous events.

It made me sick.

The Witchfinder held the Dench girl, with one hand on her forehead, the other holding a knife to her neck. I suspected the red liquid that filled a small glass tube to be Spencer's blood.

"I never thought we'd get to this point, Detective Mercer," a sigh rumbled behind the mask.

"That's the problem with hired thugs," I replied. "You can't trust them when it comes right down to it."

"I suppose..." he replied. "And I was so close too, ridding the world of this evil. The Williamson family put up far less

fight than the Dench's. I suppose Spencer never had much of a backbone to begin with. Jane is the true evil in the matter. And her daughter will never carry on the line of evil she inspires."

"Don't do this," I said, hearing someone step into the doorway behind me. It was Jane, with Gwen following, trying to stop her from seeing whatever was going on in here.

Jane burst out in a tremendous scream. Gwen grabbed her, pulling her away from the scene.

"It's my life's work, Jack. That's like me telling you to leave this house and let me finish," the Witchfinder remained unmoving. I adjusted my aim towards his head, but the shot wasn't clear enough. If I flinched, even a millisecond before firing, the girl would take a bullet.

I couldn't risk it, not yet.

"It's a funny thing, a family oath. My father, before me, took on the Crossley family, destroying the evil that lived within that home. I was trained my whole life to go out in the world and ensure that these monsters could not prevail," he started on a tangent.

"This is an innocent child," I cut him off. "She's not good, or bad, or anything in between. She knows nothing about the world, and there's not a bone in her body that's harmful."

The Witchfinder scoffed, turning to the door where Gwen and Aaron returned again, police officers following close behind.

"And what about when she gets older? Now, she knows that her heritage is in witchcraft, and she can study the ways of the wicked. No, Jack, I can't let it be so. As my forefather's before me, I fight to ensure *their* kind does not continue. And if it means taking a life, then so be it."

The Witchfinder rose to his feet, mumbling something in a language I didn't understand. I guessed it was some ritualistic bullshit and knew that my window to save the girl's life was closing. Swallowing hard, I aimed for his right leg, the shin to be precise, and fired a single bullet into it.

The girl tumbled to the ground, but so did the Witchfinder. He screamed out in agony as the blade struck the floor. The vile of blood shattering across the floor. The police rushed him, pulling the girl aside and getting the Witchfinder restrained.

He fought them at first, trying to get to the knife.

"Do you know what hell you've unleashed?" he roared, eyeing the red liquid. "Do you know what you've done?"

He screamed it from the top of his lungs until he was in custody.

I collapsed to the floor while Gwen and Aaron rushed to my side.

It was finally over.

Chapter 28

Jack

There was no joyous celebration as we often held after a completed case. I sat alone in my office, looking over the case file, remembering all that we went through to get to this point. If we were a little quicker, if we were better prepared, we could've saved the Williamson family too.

I supposed everyone felt the same way as I, no one bothering to crack open a bottle of champagne on our success. It took the lives of good people to bring an end to the horrors of the Witchfinder General.

A man named Marty Robinson, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Shortly after his arrest, searching his home, the police found Tony Robinson and his wife, Merideth, dead in the basement among the various items Marty used as the Witchfinder General. Their bodies were decomposed to the point of little more than skeletal remains when the police arrived. From a handbook among his possessions, the police learned that this was all part of a tradition. When one Witchfinder passed the torch to the next, they had to sacrifice themselves in the name of God.

I didn't pretend to understand it, and I wanted nothing to do with it. At least I knew it would end with Marty Robinson. He had no children, no family beyond the dead parents, and no one else to carry the torch of his twisted beliefs.

After finishing my final report on the matter, I closed the manila folder, eyeing the empty place where a name would go.

I picked up a black ink marker and penned the name of the case:

The Witchfinder's Woes.

As I pulled the pen off the folder, I saw her standing there. Gwen Sullivan, with crossed arms, leaning against my doorframe. The days following the events that happened that evening, she was pretty beaten up, not being able to help Spencer Williamson and his family.

"Well, Jack, I guess it's time I hit the old dusty trail," she said, eyeing the marker in my hand.

"You know you don't have to do that, right?" I replied.

"We all knew what this was," she forced a smile to her lips.

"But it doesn't have to be," I shook my head. "I've been thinking about it for a while now, we make a pretty good team."

Gwen walked into my office, stopping at the liquor cabinet and pulling out a bottle of Macallan 18 and two glasses. She poured us both a drink, then brought mine over to me and set it down.

"Let's just enjoy the time we had together," she said, lifting her glass to mine. I clinked glasses with her, taking a sip. "It seems you're running a pretty tight ship here. And you've got your partner. I'd just be a third wheel."

"Well, I guess you've got a point there. The kid is chaulking up to be a pretty good detective, I've gotta admit," I tried hiding the sting of her not accepting my offer, however small it was, to join the firm. But deep down, I knew she'd never go with it.

I was just hoping to have her back by my side.

Gwen finished her glass of whiskey, and I followed her to the door, her hand in mine. We walked through the hallways

in silence, went down the elevator, and out into the busy New York street.

“You know you can call me if you ever need me, right?” I asked, pulling her into a hug.

Gwen accepted, holding me tightly.

“I know. The same goes for you, Jack. Don’t be a stranger, alright?” breaking the hug, Gwen drew her car keys from her handbag. I watched as she walked across the street, getting into her vehicle, and with a wave of her hand, drove off.

I stood out there for a while. Even in the street full of people, I felt alone. Though the Mercer Detective Agency managed to bag another victory, it came at a significant cost. One that I’d never forget.

But as I returned to the office, with Lauren and Aaron’s smiling faces, chatting and making jokes to relieve the tension in the office, I felt an odd comfort. They were my family, and together, we conquered all hardships that were put in front of us.

It was now once more into the great abyss with only dreams of making the world a better place.

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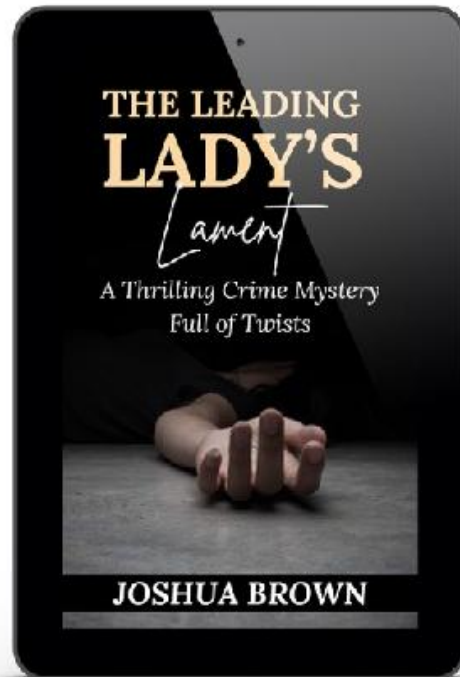
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